



The Wound that Bleeds: Violence and Feminization in the *Lais* of Marie de France

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Published online: 16 July 2019
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Abstract

At climactic moments in Marie de France's *Yonec* and *Guigemar*, the two knight-protagonists are both violently impaled or wounded. These wounds, and the Old French terms "plaie", "navrer", and "ferir" used to describe them, force the reader to reimagine the knight's body and revise the chivalric requirements of medieval masculinity. Given their common vocabulary, *Yonec* and *Guigemar* can be read in tandem as a thematic and linguistic pair, and this vocabulary allows the tales to reimagine the knight's body with female genitalia. Marie's knights represented with vaginas challenge the wound's symbolic association with the performative violence of the chivalric tradition and suggest the transformative power of love to queer men's bodies in the *lais*.

Keywords Marie de France · Queer · Violence · Wounds · Embodiment

Writing is for Marie de France the equivalent of vulnerability taken at is most literal, etymological sense, of vulnera, "wounds" represented in gaps in language that come back potentially, inevitably...to harm.

R. Howard Bloch, *The anonymous Marie de France* (2003: 13)

The *Lais* of Marie de France seem to suggest that violence and suffering are byproducts of love. Scenes of violence fill the *lais*: knights are impaled by lances, adulterous lovers boiled alive, and wives imprisoned in towers. As such, it is easy to forget the formative, important role of violence in Marie's work, or to assume that all the pain depicted in the tales is equivalent. Nonetheless, like Marie's ideal readers, we must look past the literal and 'gloss' these scenes of violence. The nuanced scenes of violence and wounding in the *lais* explore and revise twelfth-century conventions of masculinity, gender, and embodiment. In *Yonec* and *Guigemar* in particular, we can see how the knight's wound becomes an essential characteristic of the embodied male lover.

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Both *Yonec* and *Guigemar* feature climactic scenes of impalement and wounding. These scenes are thematically similar, in that they both feature the violent impalement of the knight, describe a bloody or debilitating wound, and evoke sexualized injuries from other contemporary romances. They also rely on a shared vocabulary that suggests their equivalence: the words *plaie*, *navrer*, and *ferir* connect these two scenes of violence. I will argue here that *Yonec* and *Guigemar* constitute a thematic pair that violently re-genders the male lovers by imagining them penetrated by phallic objects and embodied with female genitalia. Both of these *lais* use the same vocabulary to imagine the physical feminization of the knight—the man with a vagina.

Some critics have already pinpointed these two *lais* as evidence of non-traditional sexuality or gender presentation, though, to my knowledge, none have identified the ways these *lais* imagine knights with vaginas. Nichols writes that Marie “attacks... body fetishism... [through] the fantastic images of polymorphous beings” and “her exemplary dissolving of the edges of gender identity” in these two, and other, *lais* (1990: 35). Pickens has suggested that *Yonec* features a poetics of androgyny, but he identifies the lady, and her ability to ‘engender’ text, as the truly androgynous one, rather than Muldamarec (1994: 214). Pickens sidesteps the question of the knight’s gender instability and instead suggests that Muldamarec’s shapeshifting acts as a “reflection” for the lady’s androgyny. Alternatively, Burgwinkle has suggested homoeroticism as a theme that underpins *Guigemar* (and similarly, *Lanval* and *Bisclavret*) (2004). While both scholars have noticed a fundamental queerness to these two *lais*, however, these *lais* present a queerness that is neither androgynous, nor homoerotic. Instead, these texts depict a physically feminized male lover, and they do so by imagining the male body with female genitalia. In this sense, the knights’ bodies are coded as feminine and violently re-gendered. Conversely, Matilda Bruckner’s observation that *Guigemar* represents “the masculine equivalent of the lady and her qualities” and manifests a mostly feminine identity compliments this reading of the two *lais*, and her reading might extend to both *Guigemar* and *Yonec* (1993: 165).

As a complete sequence, the *Lais* are preserved in only one manuscript, MS Harley 978. It is clear, however, that the ordering in Harley 978 does not correspond to the order of composition, and there has been significant disagreement on the ordering of the sequence.¹ *Yonec* and *Guigemar* do not appear together in the Harley manuscript, but some modern readers have suggested that the two *lais* belong together or that they were composed one shortly after the other. Damon divided the *lais* into realistic and supernatural, with *Yonec* and *Guigemar* both characterized as supernatural; both Burgess and Illingworth suggest that *Yonec* was composed immediately before *Guigemar* in their sequence of Marie’s composition (Illingworth 1966; Burgess 1981). By exploring the thematic and linguistic similarities between these two *lais*, we might confirm Burgess and Illingworth’s suspicions that they were composed in tandem; conversely, it might suggest that Marie continued to work through

¹ While Emanuel J. Mickel, Jr. suggests that the ordering in Harley 978 should stand, others like Ernest Hoepffner and S. Foster Damon have reordered and grouped the *lais* according to their own observations (Mickel 1974; Hoepffner 1971; Damon 1929).

themes and ideas relating to emasculation, feminization, and violence over the composition of the *lais*.

Yonec's Gender Trouble

Both *Guigemar* and *Yonec* feature a male lover who refuses to embody the traditional, chivalric model of masculinity. Early in the *lai*, *Yonec*'s Muldamarec first appears to the lady in the shape of a hawk, described as “Giez ot es piez, ostur sembla; / de cinc mues fu u de sis” [it had straps on its feet and looked like a hawk of five or six moultings]. The text relates how he enters the window, and then transforms into “chevaliers bels e genz” [a fair and noble knight].² His ability to transform from man to beast, while standard fare for shapeshifters, proceeds a much more fantastic spectacle. After the lady expresses concern that he might be some kind of demon, he offers to “la semblance de vus prendrai: / le cors dame deu recevrai, / ma creance vus dirai tute” [I shall assume your appearance, receive the body of Christ, and recite all my credo for you].³ The *lai* emphasizes the corporality of his transformation from male to female here; initially, as critics have noted, the passage establishes a parallel between the transformation of the body of Christ in Mass and “naturalizes the transgressive nature of the knight’s shapeshifting” by “subsum[ing] alterity” (Nichols 1990: 39). Nevertheless, this scene frankly represents the transformation of the body of the knight as well, when Marie notes that, “le cors dame deu recevrai”. These lines suggest a physicality to his transformation through both the words *semblance* and *cors*. Muldamarec does not merely take on her *semblance* while retaining some true essence of masculinity, but he also manifests her *cors* as well. The syntactic instability of this sentence allows for two readings: the more standard translation is that the woman receives the body of God, or takes communion. However, the ordering of the words, which separates *cors* from *deu* and instead seems to pair it with *dame* hints at the corporeality of the woman’s body as well as the body of Christ. Indeed, Muldamarec’s bodily transformation is complete enough to convince the woman’s jailor who, as she enters the room, “dist li que tens est de lever, / ses dras li voeit aporer” [says that it was time to get up and that she would bring her clothes]. The text makes a point here to highlight the complete transformation of the knight’s male body into the female body of his beloved by suggesting that Muldamarec in woman’s form is exposed and that his body is completely and convincingly feminine.⁴ This transformation prefigures his later bodily transition, a feature *Yonec* shares with *Guigemar*. While it suggests a natural, and even peaceful,

² I rely on Keith Busby and Glynn Burgess’ translation of the *Lais* in this essay, unless otherwise noted (1999).

³ Pickens, of course, has already noted how this scene, and *Yonec* in general, depicts an androgynous form of sexuality in the lovers (1994).

⁴ We know that medieval people either slept nude or wore comparatively very little to bed than their day to day. Even if this scene suggests that Muldamarec in woman’s form is wearing a nightgown, medieval audiences would have glossed this as a scene of exposure in which the female body was on display.

model for gender fluidity, it acts as a counterpoint to Muldamarec's gruesome re-gendering later in the *lai*.⁵

It is upon the discovery of Muldamarec's affair with the lady and her husband's revenge that Muldamarec's body is violently transfigured. The knight, in his hawk form, flies through the window of the lady's tower and into the newly-affixed iron spikes:

En la fenestre vint volant;
mes les broches furent devant.
L'une le *fier* par mi le cors,
li sans vermeilz en sailli fors.
Quant il se sent a mort *nafrez*,
desferre sei, enz est entrez.
Devant la dame el lit descent,
que tuit li drap furent sanglent.
Ele veit le sanc e la *plaie*,
mult anguissusement s'esmaie.⁶

Sexual overtones dominate this passage. The large iron spikes that the husband has placed in the windows pierce Muldamarec's body and cause a gaping wound. The two verbs used to describe the impact of the iron spikes are *navrer* and *férir*, which Burgess and Busby translate respectively as 'to pierce' and 'to wound.' While this translation is technically accurate, it elides the sexual overtones of this scene. Instead, we might read these verbs as 'to penetrate,' or 'to wound by entering the body,' a valence suggested by the *Dictionnaire Moyen Français* as early as the fourteenth century (DMF 2015).⁷ The iron spikes are phallic symbols, and their penetration into the body of the knight allows the "red blood" to "flow... out". The knight's blood on the lady's sheets is a stark image of femininity; it calls to mind sexual consummation, menstruation, or women's virginity, all mediated through the female, rather than the male, body. On a woman's wedding day, "the evidence of blood was crucial to the medieval understanding of the loss of virginity—more crucial, in fact, than the precise details of female anatomy" (Kelly 2000: 28). This scene would of course evoke that for the medieval audience, and as the knight's body bleeds onto

⁵ Thomas Schneider has argued that this scene of transformation, a parallel to the transformation of Bis-clavret, should be read as evidence of Marie's anxiety over transformative masculine identity and a masculinity that competes with "the static representation of the male knight" (2016: 36). He suggests that these scenes inspire "fear, discomfort, and violence" (37). I disagree with this reading of *Yonec*; I think it is quite clear in this passage that Muldamarec's initial transformation from animal to man, while initially causing disconcertment, is immediately relieved by his ability to take communion, and his ensuing transformations into beast or woman are spectacularized, rather than condemned.

⁶ "[He] flew through the window, but the spikes were in front of it. One of them *pierced* his body and the red blood flowed out. When he realized that he was mortally *wounded*, he freed himself from the prongs and entered. He sat down on the bed beside his lady, covering all the sheets in blood, and when she saw the blood and the *wound* she was grievously alarmed" (emphasis mine).

⁷ The DMF suggests that *navrer* specifically includes the connotation of "en transperçant, en coupant", while *férir* suggests "atteindre qqn ou qqc à la suite d'un mouvement imprimé à qqc". See the DMF entries for "navrer" and "férir".

the sheets, the audience might imagine instead the body of the new bride, bleeding on her wedding night.

Indeed, this trope was relatively common in medieval texts. Other contemporary works feature scenes that depict the confusion of male blood on the sheets with evidence of women's adultery or lost chastity. Both Chrétien de Troyes' *Le chevalier de la charrette* and Béroul's *Tristan* feature this trope, as the bloodstained sheets of Guinevere and Isolde (or the flour on the floor of Isolde's room) testify to the sexual liaisons between the queens and their lovers the night before. Chrétien's *Lancelot*, for example, shows how this trope manipulates the bloody sheets and the resonances of the marriage bed:

Et Meliaganz, maintenant
 Qu'il fut vestuz et atornez,
 S'an est vers la chanbre tornez
 Ou la reïne se gisoit.
 Veillant la trueve et les dras voit
 Del fres sanc tachiez et gotez;
 ...Et dit: "Dame, or ai ge trovees
 Tex anseignes con je voloie!
 ...
 J'ai trové
 Sanc an vos dras, qui le tesmoingne,
 Puis qu'a dire le me besoine" (4762–90).⁸

As Leitch reminds us, the bloodstained sheets in *Le chevalier* and their later iteration in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* "pervert the cultural practice of scrutinizing and displaying the marriage-bed sheets," and "(demeaningly) associate bleeding men with menstruating women and violated virgins" (2011: 27–8).⁹ An alternate reading of the bloodstained sheets might evoke menstruation, another function of the specifically female body. There was some medieval understanding, as Kelly has convincingly demonstrated, that bloody sheets were not "fail safe" evidence of one's virginity, as medieval anatomists suggested the need "to distinguish between virginal and menstrual blood" (2000: 29). In either case, the reference to bloodstained sheets under Muldamarec's wounded body suggestively feminizes the body of the knight.

⁸ "As soon as he was dressed, Meleagant came into the room where the queen had been sleeping. He found her awake and saw the sheets stained with flesh drops of blood... 'My lady,' said Meleagant, 'now I've found the proof I've been seeking!...I have found blood on your sheets—clear proof, since you must be told...'" For the Old French, I rely on the Foulet–Uitti edition (1989); for the translation, I use Norris J. Lacy, and James J. Wilhelm's *The Romance of Arthur* (2013).

⁹ Leitch's claim explicitly challenges McCracken's insistence in *The Curse of Eve* that the bleeding male body "is not a feminized body". McCracken has suggested alternately that these scenes do evoke and revise the association of bleeding female bodies and the wedding-bed sheets, but that they imagine male blood as a symbol of male valor and prowess, much like on the battlefield, and that the knight's blood in these scenes suppresses the possibility of female blood. See Peggy McCracken, "Only Women Bleed", in *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) for more on this reading.

This feminized body is made corporeal, and the culmination of Muldamarec's violent feminization reached, when the passage uses the term *plaie* to refer to the wound that bleeds. When the iron spikes penetrate the knight, they create a cavity in the body that bleeds onto the bedsheets, a *plaie* that suggests not only a wound, but a vagina or vulva as well.¹⁰ The term *plaie* has a long history of describing both the wound/injury and the vulva. The *Dictionnaire Étymologique de l'Ancien Français* (DEAF) suggests that the word was used primarily to refer to an injury, but lists "ouverture de l'organe féminin" [the opening of the female sex organ] as one of the possible glosses (Baldinger 2014). The *FEW* lists another Latinate definition of *plaie*, or *ploye*, as "pudendum muliebre". This use of the term extended throughout the Middle Ages, from the *Roman de Renart* to the *sottie* tradition and even into medical and anatomical texts like Albert Magnus' *De secretis mulieris*. In the fifty-fifth adventure of the *Roman de Renart*, for example, Renart manages to escape the army chasing him and is welcomed home into his fortress by his wife. Then, "Il est alors entouré, caressé, embrassé. On visite ses plaies ouvertes, on les lave de vin blanc" [He is then surrounded, caressed, embraced. They visit his open wounds, they wash them with white wine] (translation mine. l.1861). The slippage between the idea of tending to his wounds and the erotic valence of being caressed and embraced adds an erotic tone to the "plaies ouverte" as he is welcomed home. By the fifteenth century, a bawdy exchange between characters in the *Sottie des sot fourrés de malice* features one character noting that "Se ploye (*plaie*) avoit patente" [Her wound/vagina had opened] and another young woman, Fine Myne, whose name is an anagram for *féminin*, replies, "Mectre y fault une tente" (the equivalent of "pitch a tent") (1935).

Medieval anatomists' descriptions of the vagina, virginity, and the hymen certainly demonstrate the physical similarities between the wound and the vulva. The wound, like the vagina, is the site where a foreign object has penetrated into the interior of the body. It is a cavity on the surface of the body that bleeds. In his *De secretis mulieris*, Albert Magnus describes a case in which a woman is impregnated

¹⁰ Of course, wound culture and its representation in literature has a long tradition, much of which does not use the wound to hint at the vagina. Wound imagery most frequently plays a role in the representation of medieval masculinities and the life of the warrior, while another parallel tradition exists within hagiography and the suffering of Christ. Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries have outlined the divergent cultural traditions of wounds from battle or injury, spiritual wounds, and their literary representations in *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), work that is complemented by other studies on pain, suffering, and blood in medieval cultures like Bettina Bildhauer's *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006); Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure, and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2005); and Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). For more on medieval warrior culture and violence, see Joanna Bellis and Laura Slater, *Representing War and Violence: 1250–160* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016); Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery, and Oren Falk, *'A Great Effusion of Blood': Interpreting Medieval Violence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); and Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000); For more on the theological significance of wounds, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). While this tradition of wound imagery is the dominant one, it is not the only one. Indeed, representations of wounds that evoke female genitalia challenge and revise dominant models of medieval masculinity by evoking the more common association of wounds with masculinity and prowess.

after a man ejaculated in the tepid water in which she was bathing; responding to the question of whether the woman is still a virgin, he asserts that breaking the hymen is “a wound in the skin of virginity” (Lemay 1992: 66). To break the hymen during sex, or even accidentally, leaves a literal wound between the woman’s legs which can never be healed. In fact, the visceral descriptions of the hymen in his treatise suggest that it is a physical part of the body characterized by its veins and arteries, so much so that to “wound” the “skin of virginity” becomes a kind of physical, bloody trauma for women. Medieval authors in the Latin also made this connection between the wound and female genitalia, as the Latin word *vulnus* puns with the word *vulva*. Medieval authors were certainly aware of this link, as scholars like Wolfgang Riehle have demonstrated. James of Milan’s thirteenth-century *Stimulus Amoris* suggests in a vision of his union of Christ that he entered into the side wound and “*vulnus vulneri copulatur*” [wound coupled with wound], a phrase which Riehle has noted puns on the similarity between the two terms (1981: 46).

Critics have also catalogued the visual resonances of the wound with the vulva in medieval religious art. Bynum’s *Jesus as Mother* identifies the medieval association of Christ with maternal and feminine imagery; she asserts that Christ’s side wound visually evoked female genitalia in medieval art and that discussions of his side wound often featured highly sexualized scenes of communion with the blood pouring out of it (1982). Karma Lochrie develops upon this research as she notes the “transitivity of wound to vulva/vagina” in devotional imagery of the lance wound (1997: 190). The wound is not merely a maternal site, as Bynum suggests, but a sexual one, which elides the masculine body with the feminine. Easton suggests that the wound is “mandorla-like, but it is also visually identical to the way the vagina was depicted in places such as medieval manuals” (2008: 5).

Yonec’s use of the word *plaie* and the sexual overtones of this passage thus suggest that, rather than represent an androgynous figure, Marie completely feminizes Muldamarec instead. The text imagines his body penetrated by phallic objects, in distinctly feminine poses on the bed, and, ultimately, with female genitalia. Muldamarec’s recognition that his affair with the lady will result in his death is incomplete; his affair also results in his violent re-gendering, the erasure of his physical masculinity, and his body’s transformation from male to female. The transformation he affected earlier on in the *lai* has become permanent.

Guigemar, the Wound, and the Knot

Guigemar’s gender presentation seems relatively straightforward at first, but critics have noted how this *lai* anxiously presents him as sexually deviant in some way. Burgwinkle has identified the homoeroticism of this *lai*, suggesting that the lines “*de tant i out mespris nature / que unc de nule amur n’out cure*” [Nature had done him such a grievous wrong that he never displayed the slightest interest in love] can be read as either Nature wronging Guigemar or Guigemar violating the laws of Nature

(2004: 141).¹¹ He also suggests that the knight's sexual indifference and initial reluctance to engage romantically with women hints at the character's queerness, a queerness echoed by the oddity and discomfort suggested by his solitary hunting practices. Furthermore, we might read the hind, who appears with sexual characteristics of both male and female deer, as "Guigemar's former self, a mirror image of his own former queer nature: alone, hermaphroditic, marked as double and different" (153–4). Maddox alternatively suggests that this interaction, which he calls a specular encounter, allows Guigemar to recognize his own heterosexual potential and reflects what he already knows to be true about himself: "Encounters of this sort—let us call them specular encounters—always occur at a major intersection of selfhood with a crucial new perspective on its own identity" (2000: 3). While I agree that the hind is a mirror of Guigemar and allows a "perspective on... [his] own identity", I argue that this identity is neither homosexual nor heterosexual, as Burgwinkle and Maddox respectively argue. Instead, Guigemar's confrontation with the hermaphroditic hind directly prefigures his own hermaphroditic re-gendering shortly thereafter, as does Muldamarec's ability to shapeshift from male to female. Both of these *lais* instead depict a wondrous spectacle of sexual fluidity and hermaphroditism that directly prefigures the way that the male lover's body will be re-gendered later in the *lai*.

The scene of the hunt wherein Guigemar's own arrow strikes his body after rebounding off the flank of the hind echoes the same vocabulary we observed during the disembowelment of Muldamarec. As Guigemar's arrow strikes the hind, it ricochets back towards his own body, and:

"Guigemar *fiert* en tel manière
 en la quisse desqu'al cheval,
 que tost l'estuet descendre a val.
 A terre chiet sur l'erbe drue
 de lez la bisse qu'out ferue.
 La bisse, ki *nafree* esteit,
 anguissuse ert, si se plaigneit.
 Après parla en itel guise:
 "Oi, lasse! Jo sui ocise!
 ...
 Ne par herbe ne par racine,
 Ne par mire ne par poisun
 N'avras tu ja mes guarisun
 De la plaie qu'as en la quisse..."¹²

¹¹ On the other hand, Rupert T. Pickens suggests that, despite the syntactic uncertainty in these lines and the controversy it has engendered, Nature should be the subject in these lines. See Rupert T. Pickens, "Thematic Structure in Marie de France's Guigemar," *Romania* 95 (1974): 328–41.

¹² "...but the arrow rebounded, *hitting* Guigemar in the thigh and going right through onto the horse's flesh. He was forced to dismount and fell back on the thick grass beside the hind he had struck. The animal, *wounded* and in great pain, lamented in these words: "Alas! I am mortally wounded!... May you never find a cure, nor may any herb, root, doctor or potion ever heal *the wound you have in your thigh...*" (emphasis mine).

As in *Yonec*, this scene describes a male protagonist and soon-to-be lover who suffers a penetrating wound. The arrow acts as a counterpoint to the iron spike in *Yonec*, and both weapons have remarkably similar, phallic shapes, though admittedly different materials. Furthermore, Marie describes the wound path of Guigemar's arrow with the adjectival form of the verb *navrer* and the verb *fêrir*, both terms that appear in *Yonec* to describe the boring, penetrating nature of the wound. The phallic penetration of the man's thigh by the arrow results in the creation of its own *plaie*, echoing Muldamarec's vagina/wound from the iron spike. Interestingly, it is the hind in this scene who Marie identifies as *nafrée*, or pierced/penetrated by the arrow, rather than Guigemar. Nonetheless, if the hind represents Guigemar's double or is a mirror of his own self, this suggests that Guigemar's own injury is similarly penetrating. If the arrow penetrates the body of the hind, surely it must do the same to Guigemar's thigh. This passage further forecloses the distinctions between Guigemar and the hind as, both wounded, the knight falls to the grass "beside the hind he had struck", and lies parallel to her, her functional analogue.¹³

Unlike in *Yonec*, the text does not seem interested in whether or not the wound/vagina bleeds, though it seems unlikely that it does not. But *Guigemar* counters the sexualized images of the woman's vagina bleeding onto the sheets on her wedding night found in *Yonec* with the precise position of the wound/vulva on Guigemar's thigh. Placing the wound on or between the knight's thighs locates female genitalia in the anatomically correct location—or at least as close as the text can get—and replaces the phallus with the vulva instead. Klerks reads this scene as one of castration; with the removal of the phallus, the text substitutes the vagina in its place (1995).¹⁴ Indeed, critics commonly read the trope of the wounded thigh, which appears famously in the grail cycle, as a symbol for some sort of sexual injury that would render the man impotent. Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, for example, claims that the wound between the Anfortas' thighs is the result of prior promiscuity and notes that the wound never stops bleeding, much like Muldamarec's wound in *Yonec*. As McCracken suggests, "the representation of the bleeding wound between the thighs in grail romances might be seen to disrupt the categories [of sexual difference] that we have thus far seen" (2003: 100). By locating the wound in Guigemar's thigh, Marie's *lai* draws on a tradition that reduces or delegitimizes the man's virility; by adding the penetrating wound and the wound-as-vagina,

¹³ Nichols has suggested that the mirroring of Guigemar and the hind and their simultaneous wounding is a strategy for "connecting Guigemar's fate so fantastically to that of the white doe". Marie, he claims, "forcibly binds him to the blurring of gender alterity that the doe represents" (1990: 32).

¹⁴ Klerks further reads Guigemar as simultaneously a celebration of mutuality in love, predicated upon understanding rather than violence and rape, and a condemnation of the "challenges of heterosexual union" which result in further violence against the woman. But perhaps we should not read this relationship and its ultimate success as a valorization of a "heterosexual union". We could instead read *Guigemar* as an imagined *homosexual* union; if *Guigemar* repeatedly imagines the knight as feminized, castrated, and with female genitalia, perhaps the success of the relationship ultimately hinges upon the relationship as same-sex—between two equals, rather than between a master and his lesser. Whereas in *Yonec*, the violent re-gendering he experiences kills the knight, Guigemar survives, and his wounding leads him to develop a functional relationship with his lady. Perhaps feminization is a necessary step in the development of mutual love.

she takes this tradition to its logical extreme and imagines Guigemar with female genitalia.¹⁵

Of course, the term *plaie* in *Guigemar* echoes and engages with another important symbol in the *lai*: the term *plait*, or ‘knot.’¹⁶ Nancy Durling has convincingly demonstrated a valence between the two terms and their importance to the structure of the *lai* (1991). Tracy Adams further notes the similarities of the word to the third-person conjunction of the verb *plaisir*, which means “to experience pleasure”. In doing so, she notices the erotic potential inherent in the wound (2005). But, rather than taking away from a sexual reading of the term, the relationship between the wound and the knot further attests to the potential of reading the *plaie* as a vagina. The image of the knot as vagina, or at least as indicative of female genitalia, was perhaps even more prevalent in the Middle Ages than the wound. Albert Magnus refers to the *nodus virginalis*, or the “knot of virginity”, when he describes the hymen and virginity tests, while a later anatomist, Guilielmus de Salecito, follows through on the imagery of the knot by suggesting that the *nodus virginalis* was “tightly tied and wrinkled with veins and arteries that stand out like creases on a chickpea” (Bullough and Brundage 1982: 194).¹⁷ This visceral description suggests the link between the physical appearance of the vulva and the image of the “knot”. Both the *plaie* created in Guigemar’s thigh and the *plait* he uses to bind it (or to tie in his shirt) encourages a queer reading of the knight’s body, with these terms serving as references to knight’s physical feminization.

Men with Vaginas

“No poet of her [Marie’s] time is more aware, even what we might call ‘critically aware,’ of the effects of language upon meaning” (2003: 11). Marie herself tells us in her prologue to be aware of language, to look for the obscure, and to read with a critical eye.

“Custume fu as anciëns

...

es livres que jadis faiseient

¹⁵ While it is outside the scope of this article, another term worth examining in *Guigemar* might be “mahaigniez”, which DEAF defines as, “blesser grièvement, mutiler”. Burgwinkle notes, “When he and his three henchmen break into the lady’s chamber, Guigemar grabs hold of a heavy wooden curtain rod with which he threatens to leave them all “mahaigniez” (56, 600), the same word used to describe his own thigh wound and the infamous wound of the Fisher King in the *Roman du graal*. Though Guigemar, become phallic avenger, is outnumbered four to one, he fights off three swordsmen with his stick” (158).

¹⁶ Indeed, the wound in *Guigemar* has been the site of significant critical attention. Many of these analyses suggest that the wound is a physical representation of Marie’s authorship or discourse in *Guigemar*. Robert Hanning, for example, suggests that it is only by being wounded that the hind can speak and that this scene directly correlates to Marie’s prologue, in which she imagines herself attacked by dog-like critics who tear her open. Durling and Adams also suggest that, beyond the valence between the terms for knot and wound, the knot/wound also echoes the word *plait* as complaint, lament, discussion, or plea, and thus suggests the importance of the image for Marie’s authorship.

¹⁷ For an excellent analysis of the hymen and its importance to medieval and early modern ideas of virginity, see Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

assez oscurement diseient
 pur cels ki a venir esteient
 e ki apendre les deveient,
 que peüssent gloser la letre
 e de lur sen le surplus metre.
 Li philosophe le saveient,
 e par els meïsme entendeient,
 cum plus trespasereit de tens,
 ...
 Pur ceo començai a penser
 d'alkune bone estoire faire..."¹⁸

Marie imagines herself as part of this ancient tradition, and demands that we, her readers, look for the obscure in her work. Her *Lais* require us to be *philosophe[s]* and look deeper for hidden meanings. In this vein, we must read the *plaie* not only for its literal meaning, but attend to its symbolic meaning as well.

On its surface, the *plaie* as wound represents an initiation into traditional chivalric masculinity, a cultural system that requires deeds of valor, violence, and wounds in order for a man to earn the love of his mistress and his culture's approbation. But, the secondary significance of the term suggests that Marie's depiction of the *plaie* also responds to and rebukes this model of masculinity. Her *lais* explore alternative models of masculinity and gender by imagining men with vaginas. The aggressive, possessive, and violent husbands we see pitted against our heroes in *Guigemar* and *Yonec* feature prominently in the *lais*, but they are countered by queer representations of our heroes. J. Halberstam's term, 'female masculinities,' identifies bodies that refigure and expose the cultural construction of masculinity by mapping both physically and culturally male traits onto female bodies. These bodies "explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity" (1998: 9). Marie's *lais* reverse this; they imagine a medieval 'male femininity' that translates the vulva, a physical marker from the female body, onto the knight's male body. The knight with a vagina and the feminization of the knight's body in these stories continuously disrupts more accepted forms of medieval masculinity and insists upon new, queer models.

This is why, while thematically similar to the themes we see in the previous two *lais*, *Chaitivel* does not follow the same linguistic pattern as *Yonec* and *Guigemar*. The emasculation of the male lover hinted at in *Yonec* and *Guigemar* is explicit in *Chaitivel*, as the *lai* images an openly castrated or impotent male lover unable to consummate his relationship with the lady. The *lai*'s depiction of male lover who has been wounded through the thigh conjures the same imagery of the Fisher King

¹⁸ "It was customary for the ancients, in the books which they wrote... to express themselves very obscurely so that those in later generations, who had to learn them, could provide a gloss for the text and put the finishing touches to their meaning. Men of learning were aware of this and their experience had taught them that the more time they spent studying texts the more subtle would be their understanding of them... For this reason I began to think of working on some good story..."

as Guigemar's wound; the lance, yet another phallic symbol and a physical manifestation of male virility and prowess, pierces the knight, evoking the same resonances of penetration as we see in both *Yonec* and *Guigemar*. The tale even repeatedly refers to the knight as *nafrez*, one of the specific linguistic markers from the previous two *lai*. "Kar li trei i furent ocis / e li quarz *nafrez* e mal mis / *par mi la quisse* e enz el cors / si que la lance parut fors" [For three of them were killed and the fourth was *injured and wounded in the thigh* in such a way that the lance passed right through his body], Marie tells us; then again later: "Sages mires aveit mandez / sis a al chevalier livrez, / ki en sa chamber jut *nafrez*" [She had summoned learned doctors and the knight lying wounded in her chamber] (emphasis mine). Nonetheless, though *Chaitivel* obviously features a wounded protagonist and modern translations use the word, Marie studiously avoids the term *plaie* in this *lai*. Why might this be? What do we make of Marie's refusal to imagine the knight with a *plaie* in the *lai* that already gestures towards castration?

It is clear that the knight in *Chaitivel* embodies a more normative medieval model for masculinity than either Muldamarec or Guigemar. His desire for the lady leads him to the public arena of the tournament; he neither transforms from man to beast, like Muldamarec, or isolates himself in the forest, like Guigemar. He models the perfect knight and the chivalric, masculine ideal in his willingness to fight, and possibly die, for his lady. His lament stems from his failure and enduring desire to adhere to this same, normative model. While the knight is made impotent, he does not have a vagina and he is not queer, because he does not seek to challenge the boundaries of chivalric masculinity. By contrast, the heroes of *Yonec* and *Guigemar* queer gender norms from the very beginning: Muldamarec's shapeshifting and Guigemar's hind double foreground this. They have already transgressed the norms that *Chaitivel*'s knight lives by.

Of course, in characteristic fashion, Marie never fully condemns nor celebrates the queer re-gendering of the knight. For instance, while the creation of Guigemar's vagina is essential to the development as a character, and it peacefully coexists with more traditional, heteronormative developments later in the tale, Muldamarec dies shortly after he is forcibly re-gendered (though he has already impregnated his lady). There is little point in trying to identify Marie's own ideology here; in fact, to do so would miss the point entirely. Marie's *lais* defy characterization. They refuse to adhere to a specific genre, style, or perspective, and in their variety, they form a *tableau* of perspectives on love and gender. Whatever Marie's own ideas about masculinity, she includes these queer bodies and men with vaginas in her pantheon of male lovers. In doing so, she allows the reader to identify with and imagine themselves as these figures if they so desire.

When Guigemar's boat arrives at his lady's tower and the eponymous hero falls in love, the poem reintroduces the same terms, *plaie* and *navrer*, used to imagine the knight's vagina. Marie claims that "la dame l'a si nafré" [the lady had wounded him so deeply...]. Then she remarks that, "Amurs est plaie dedanz corz" [Love is a wound in the heart]. There is, of course, a long medieval tradition describing the violence of love, in which, for example, arrows from the lady's eyes might pierce the lover's heart. But in light of Marie's men with vaginas, these lines suggest something more radical. Perhaps, Marie suggests, that love itself is a queer force.

In loving and being loved in return, the knight transforms into something new. For Marie, love has the potential to transfigure not only the man's body, but to do something much more subversive: to convert the heart to match.

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