

# Ethical Choice and Tragical Chaos in the *Lais* by Marie de France

Junhyun Kim

**Abstract:** The twelve *Lais* written by Marie de France are meaningful when trying to grasp the perception and the reality of the concept of love in the Middle Ages, in other words, the characteristics of courtly love, of the meaning of medieval marriage in feudal societies, etc. Furthermore, the works of Marie de France cannot be neglected in the view of ethical literary criticism if we wish to tackle the problems of indifference and disregard for taboos, of ethical conflict and social balance, and of confusion and restoration of order, all themes that are expressed in numerous medieval literary works. When considering this, *Equitan*, which deals with the issue of a threesome love involving a king, his seneschal, and the seneschal's wife, is a good example to reassess how, within the frame of love, ethical choices and confusion can create conflicts, and how the tragedy of an individual who has lost all rational judgments and ethical consciousness is amplified into chaos and disorder within the social order, as well as to question what is the real nature of love.

**Key words:** Marie de France; *Equitan*; love; ethical choice; ethical chaos

**Author:** Junhyun Kim is Associate Professor at the Department of French Language & Literature of Korea University (Seoul, Korea). His research areas are Medieval French literature and Lyrics of the late medieval France, in particular François Villon (Email: Villon@korea.ac.kr). This study was supported by a faculty research grant from the College of Liberal Arts at Korea University in 2017.

**标题：** 玛丽·德·弗朗斯的短诗里所显露的伦理选择和悲剧性的混乱

**内容摘要：** 12世纪女诗人玛丽·德·弗朗斯留下的12篇《短诗》在研究中世纪对爱情的认识以及考察当时的社会面貌方面上，也就是探讨“宫廷式恋爱”的特征与中世纪的“结婚”以及分析封建社会与爱情的意义的问题上具有重要意义。此外，通过玛丽·德·弗朗斯的作品，我们还可以从文学伦理批评的视角上探讨中世纪的文学作品出现的无差别性以及忽略禁忌、伦理矛盾、社会均衡问题、秩序的恢复以及无秩序等问题。从这一观点出发，在以王与臣下，还有臣下妻子的三角关系中出现的“爱情”的问题为主题的作品“equitan”解释以下的问题：探讨爱情以何种方式去引起伦理选择与混乱的

矛盾状况；丧失一切理性与伦理意识的个体所经历的悲剧如何在社会关系之中扩大了混乱与无秩序的状况；“爱情”的特性到底为何物。

**关键词：** 玛丽·德·弗朗斯；*équitan*；爱情；伦理选择；伦理混乱

**作者简介：** 金竣顯，韩国高丽大学法语法文系副教授，主要研究方向为中世纪法国文学，中世纪期抒情诗（弗兰索瓦·维庸）。

### Introduction

When reviewing the *Lais* of Marie de France, a 12<sup>th</sup>-century woman poet in the reign of Henry II, the word ‘merveilleux’ (marvel) is often used as an inherent part of her literature. In *Guigemar*, for instance, we see a white hind with the antlers of a stag foretelling the protagonist’s destiny; in *Yonec*, a knight-bird flies in a high tower and turns into a human being; Lanval’s fairy transcends human beauty; in *Bisclavre (The Werewolf)*, the main character periodically turns into a werewolf, etc. As these examples show it, the *Lais* frequently tell about the transcendent world and various kinds of mysterious phenomena. But these elements are not intended to evoke supernatural fantasies, nor to put forward the narrative features of folk tales and legends. The poetess uses them as a ground upon which she can emphasize the value and meaning of love, in all the shapes it appears within human life and society.

Throughout the twelve *Lais*, which are thought to have been composed around 1160, ‘Love’ is depicted across a vast spectrum of aspects. In *Chievrefoil (The Honeysuckle)*, the sentence “You cannot live without me, nor I without you” (192),<sup>1</sup> helps to accentuate the fact that the love Tristan and Iseult share is just like “the honeysuckle that attaches itself to the hazel tree” (192),<sup>1</sup> with two bodies but one heart. The heroine of *Le Frêne (The Ash Tree)*, like Griselda in *The Clerk’s Tale* of *The Canterbury Tales*, finally finds happiness by showing devoted love and total sacrifice. *Milun* tells the story of two lovers who are united after long separation. As shown through these examples, Marie de France constantly emphasizes the significance of love, and the dualism of love and happiness throughout her *Lais*.

However, ‘Love’, provider of true happiness, can on the contrary be at the source of the most sinister tragedy, and lead to terrible endings through serious ethical confusion. These negative aspects often go beyond common sense and create ultimately a state of chaos and confusion, beyond the mere violation of taboos,

1 For the French version we used *Les Lais de Marie de France*. ed. Jean Rychner. Paris: Champion, 1983. English translations are from the version of *The Lais of Marie de France*. tr. Robert Hanning & Joan Ferrante. Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1982. Subsequent references to this text are given by page number in parentheses.

where all rational judgments are disregarded. In this context, *Equitan* (the story of a king in love with a vassal's wife, attempting to murder the vassal with the help of his lover, and finally losing his own life in an absurd ending) suggests that the ethical confusion provoked by 'Love', along with its chaotic result, as well as all its implications must be carefully acknowledged.

### I. Love in the Middle Ages and Marie de France

Prior to the analysis of *Equitan*, we ought to take a brief look at the perception of love in the Middle Ages as it may turn useful for further discussion. Marie de France emphasizes the importance of voluntary and faithful love, often implying that love is the starting point of happiness; yet it is worth noticing that the love described in the *Lais* does not always occur within the legitimate and proper frame of holy matrimony. Just like the 'fin'amor' professed by the troubadours of Southern France, and like 'l'amour courtois' (Courtly love), with its tales of love outside the marriage, of adulterous love, Marie de France writes love stories that resemble that of Lancelot of the lake and Queen Guinevere.

Andreas Capellanus, who was a contemporary of Marie de France, listed 31 precepts of love in his *De Amore (The Art of Courtly Love)*, and argued that "Marriage is no real excuse for not loving."<sup>1</sup> Following a similar line of thought, we read in *Laüstic (The Nightingale)* a story about a married woman who falls in love with a young knight who is well known for his prowess and great valour. In *Guigemar*, the main protagonist has a liaison with a lady who is noble, beautiful and wise and who happens to be married to a lord described as "a very old man exceedingly jealous." In *Yonec*, the knight-bird shares his love with a young and beautiful woman who is being guarded in a high tower by her husband. In *Eliduc*, the main protagonist of the eponymous lay, who is already married to Guildelüec, leaves his country to serve another king in a time of war and there falls in love with the king's daughter. Lastly the well-known love story of Tristan and Iseult as told in *Chievrefoil* serves our purpose to remind that the story that unfolds is happening between the king Marc's wife and the king's very own nephew. As with many works that sing courtly love, lovers who make love in the works of Marie de France do not feel any remorse nor regret about the immoral nature of their relationship. A mischievous husband is described as an antagonist who interferes with the love of two lovers, and the lovers are drawn as if they are not even concerned about the salvation of their souls that was so important in Christianity. Moreover as it is well shown in

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1 See Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*. Trans. John J. Parry. New (York: Columbia UP, 1960) 184.

*Yonec*, when writing about the evil schemes of the husband to kill the knight-bird, the author exclaims, “God, he doesn’t know what treachery the villains are preparing” (145), thus expressing feelings of compassion towards the lovers despite the illegitimate nature of their relation according to social standards.

However, this does not mean that Marie de France is actively advocating adulterous love. The world depicted by the 12<sup>th</sup> Century poetess in her *Lais* does not deviate too much from the reality of her times, centered on the male warrior within a feudal system unique to the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, the marriage system was almost entirely based on political and economic considerations, viewed as a means for the preservation of the family and clan as well as for the increase of wealth, influence and power. Married women were often separated from their husband who were away on wars, hunting, tournaments, and many other errands. The reality of medieval marriages inevitably produced unhappy marriages and the misfortune of women, and Marie de France’s view on adultery or on the victims of unhappy marriage reflects in great parts this reality. The *Lais*’ main point is to emphasize that voluntary and faithful love is the best virtue, true happiness and absolute value.

Marie de France is constantly stressing the true value and significance of love because the world she paints is a very abnormal and imperfect space, a negative world, a kind of ‘monde à rebours’ (world against Nature). In at least eight of the twelve *Lais*, sexual offenses or ethical violations play an important role in the development of the plot. For example, in the case of *Le Frêne*, after having scold a neighbour who had twins saying that she had two babies at the same time because she had sexual intercourse with two different men, a woman tries to kill one of her offspring when she herself gives birth to twins. Because of the gossip of a mother “deceitful and proud, evil-tongued and envious” (73), the heroine is thrown down under an ash tree near a monastery, and goes through all kinds of misfortune. In *Deus Amanz (The Two Lovers)*, a king, like the king from the folk tale who tries to marry his daughter who looks exactly like his dead wife, is left only with his daughter after he lost his wife, and in order to keep her by his side sets impossible conditions for the princess’s suitors. In another work, a wife who has become aware of the secret of her husband who turns into a werewolf, conspires with another man who has been in love with her for a long time, and hides her husband’s clothes to keep him out of the world of humans. This inverted world seems to reach its height with the lai of *Equitan*, where a woman loves the king her husband serves, and conspires with him to kill her husband.

## II. Love in Equitan: The First Ethical Confusion

Many early researchers seemed to consider this *Lai* to be either an early work or a work by another author because of the ridiculous ending which would best fit a comic tale (*fabliau*), and also because the moral against adultery and depraved woman is so explicit and cliché (Hoepfner 150). However, as will be discussed in detail later on, one of the reasons why Marie de France wanted to save the adventures of those Bretons, i.e. the Celts, from the wreckage of memory, was the fate of *Equitan* and the woman who loved him so dearly. In this respect, *Equitan* can be interpreted on different levels, with the notion of edification understood in a deeper sense.

At the beginning of the work, Marie de France writes: “*Equitan* was a man of great worth, dearly loved in his own land” (60), thus leaving readers with the expectation that the hero will be like the beloved wise kings from the epic poems tradition; but in the following passage she stresses out that he “loves the sport and lovemaking; and so he kept a body of knights in his service” (60). After introducing the king in such a manner, she adds the following remarks: “Whoever indulges in love without sense or moderation recklessly endangers his life; such is the nature of love that no one involved with it can keep his head” (60).

The poetess does not so much tell that *Equitan* should have known that he had to abstain from loving his vassal’s wife, as she stresses that he should have had better knowledge of the nature of love (Burgess 41). That a deep understanding of love and a grasp of its characteristics are necessary to overcome the various temptations and dangers of love seems to be one of the key elements of Marie de France’s intention, but the story also acts as an ‘*exemplum*’ that shows what the destructive power of love is on a social level rather than on a merely personal level. Because though medieval literary works are not historical materials in a strict sense, they can be used to measure individual problems, personal and individual relations, violations and constraints that were part of a past society (Flori 22). Furthermore, *Equitan* also has significance in that it provides an opportunity to reflect on the ethical choices and reasons of a human being, and the results derived from them.

Immediately after the brief mention of the king, his seneschal is described as a “good knight, brave and loyal, who took care of his land for him, governed and administered it” (60). It is explained that the seneschal replaces the king in his duties because “he would never, no matter what the emergency, neglect his hunting, his hawking, or his other amusements” (60-61) except in case of war. The relationship between the king and his vassal revealed at the beginning of the work shows



the king devoting himself to the world of love and hunting while his vassal administers state affairs. On the other hand, the portrayal of the vassal's wife hints in a puzzling manner at the ending of their relationship: "This seneschal took a wife through whom great harm later came to the land" (61).

In a way that is reminiscent of the 'amor de lonh', namely 'love from afar' the troubadours sang, Equitan harbours a desire for his seneschal's wife even before seeing her. Of course, it is clear that for Equitan seducing his vassal's wife appears as a new conquest and another victory of love. However, it would be wrong to identify Equitan with the one who is determined to seduce the virtuous, married, innocent woman. Equitan takes the opportunity to go hunting on the land where his vassal lives and decides to convey his feelings to his wife as he will stay overnight in their house. But the moment he sees the woman, he gets a very deep wound in the heart, struck by Love's arrow. Enslaved by the god of Love, he eventually loses good sense, wisdom, and understanding. Equitan becomes "sad and depressed" (61), and as a result, he cannot sleep that night, blaming himself in mournful silence.

I think I have no choice but to love her — yet if I love her, I'm doing wrong; she's the wife of my seneschal. I owe him the same faith and love that I want him to give me. If, by some means, he found out about this I know how much it would upset him. (62)

In most medieval works, a knight is in love with a king or a lord's wife, but in *Equitan*, it is the king who loves his vassal's wife. The sighing monologue of Equitan is no different than that of the typical courtly lover who wishes that the woman he loves grants him a favor. Some researchers have expressed the opinion that the love a young knight harbours for his lord's wife, in other words courtly love, is some sort of a game that can help strengthen the ethical stance of the vassal-lord relationship (Duby 56-63). But the reaction of King Arthur after he discovers Lancelot and Guinevere's treason, as well as the tragic events that eventually led to the fall of his kingdom, shows well enough the results courtly love can have when it goes beyond reason. In short, if the vassal has a duty to control his emotions, King Equitan senses the reality of these constraints very weakly, and therefore the concern about vassal-lord relationship based on mutual trust and faithfulness is transformed in an odd manner, "Still, it would be a lot worse if I went mad out of concern for him" (62), as he puts forward both courtly love and selfishness:

It would be a shame for such a beautiful woman not to have a lover! What

would become of her finer qualities if she didn't nourish them by a secret love? There isn't a man in the world who wouldn't be vastly improved if she loved him. (62)

Through a very self-centered argumentation, he attempts to justify himself by saying that his being sick is more serious than his vassal's suffering, and that the love he harbours for a woman makes her a better person according to a twisted interpretation of courtly love. And he justifies it basing himself on the logic of courtly love. As a result, his thought turns into an argument that the vassal's best option is to endure and agree to share his wife with his lord.

And if the seneschal should hear of the affair, he oughtn't be too crushed by it; he certainly can't hold her all by himself, and I'm happy to share the burden with him! (62)

Despite the fact that feudal responsibility and courtly love have fundamentally incompatible attributes, the king makes the disloyalty in feudal sense a loyalty in terms of courtly love, and he turns a husband's right to a vicious virtue while he praises his own desire as a high virtue. The next day, Equitan reveals his desire to her, letting her know that she holds all power to comfort him or let him die. But strangely, as a response, she points out the difference of status between herself and the king.

I must have some time to think. This is so new to me, I have no idea what to say. You're a king of high nobility, and I'm not at all of such fortune that you should single me out to have a love affair with. If you get what you want from me, I have no doubt about it: you'll soon get tired of me, and I'll be far worse off than before. (63)

She points out that even if she were to allow such a love, this love wouldn't be shared equally between the two of them, because Equitan is a powerful king while she is the wife of his vassal, which means that he, as her king, would have all authority over her. Arguing that "Love is worthless if it's not mutual" (64), she concludes that a love with a poor but loyal man who also possesses good sense and merit is worth more than the love of a king. Moreover, she emphasizes the fact that anyone who aims higher in love than his own station in life entitles him to will be frightened by all manner of things. On the other hand, the powerful and rich man

is confident that no one will steal his mistress away whose favor he obtains by his authority over her. Oddly, in the woman's response, no argument can be found on ethics, moral or emotional aspects. Her love for her husband or the question of fidelity to husband is not mentioned at all, and she seems to be concerned only by the issues of equality and equity among lovers of different social status. To which Equitan responds that "if she places a high enough value on her love that she isn't inconstant" (64) any wise and courtly woman deserves to receive the faithful love of king or lord. The king then pleads his cause with this maxim, "Whoever is inconstant in love and gives himself up to treachery is mocked and deceived in the end" (64).

My dear lady, I'm offering myself to you! Don't think of me as your king, but as your vassal and your lover. I tell you, I promise you I'll do whatever you want. Don't let me die on your account! You be the lord and I'll be the servant — you be the proud one and I'll be the beggar! (64-65)

Equitan, who in the past was a conqueror of women, is now conquered by a woman and reveals a new identity, as the real king is transformed into a vassal of love. In the end, the wife of the vassal allows the king to love her. Of course, it is unclear whether the woman's acceptance of the love of Equitan is due to the aggressive courtship of the king, to the temptation of taking a high-ranked king as a lover, or to the fear of the king's anger were she to refuse him (Kinoshita *et al.* 66). The scene where the two people exchange rings and promises, just like at a wedding, gives the impression that the feudal pledge is transformed into a pledge of love, and it seems that Equitan has literally crossed into a world of love at the antipode of the real world (Sienaert 72).

### **III. Marriage and Murder Conspiracy: Ethical Confusion and Tragedy**

After describing the two lovers, Marie de France anticipates the end of the work: "They kept their promises and loved each other well; they died for this in the end" (65). Their love affair lasted a long time without anyone hearing of it. And Equitan loved only his vassal's wife without looking at any other woman. With the seneschal holding court and hearing pleas and accusations in place of the king while the king himself was busy loving his seneschal's wife, the relations are turned upside-down since the vassal now rules over the king's territory often seen as the incarnation of his queen.

At this point happens an incident. Some courtiers start to show discontent over



king, who not only does not think about marriage, but even refuses to hear anything of marriage. To cite a similar example, in *Le Frêne*, vassal knights advise their king who lives with a woman of obscure birth without marrying her “to marry a noble woman, and to get rid of this mistress of his. They’d be pleased if he had an heir who could succeed to his land and inheritance; it would be much to their disadvantage if he was deterred by his concubine from having a child born in wedlock” (81-82). They add that, if their needs are not met, “they would no longer consider him their lord or willingly serve him if he didn’t do what they wanted” (82). In medieval times, it was not rare for the vassals to urge their king to marry. By urging the marriage of the king, they had in mind the birth of a legitimate heir to the throne as well as the preservation of their own rights as vassals of the family, and such consideration of interests between lord and vassals were indeed part of the reality of medieval marriage. At last, upon hearing this matter, his mistress gets so frightened she opens her heart to the king Equitan.

My lord, I’m crying because of our love, which has brought me to great sorrow: you’re going to take a wife, some king’s daughter, and you will get rid of me; I’ve heard all about it, I know it’s true. And — alas! — what will become of me? On your account I must now face death, for I have no other comfort than you. (66)

In order to appease his lover so deeply anxious, Equitan says: “Dear love, don’t be afraid! I promise I’ll never take a wife, never leave you for another. Believe me, this is the truth: If your husband were dead, I’d make you my lady and my queen; no one could stop me” (66). At the moment when the question of marriage, a social convention that had not been a big issue so far, is being brought up, the two lovers want to make their love and relationship legitimate, and the existence of the husband stands out back again. For the first time, Equitan combines his position as king and his position as a lover, and as soon as these two positions are combined, a tragic ending is to be expected (Sienaert 73). It may have been simply a word to appease the woman, but “once spoken, turn back upon the speaker and, like Guigemar’s arrow, Lanval’s promise, or the white lie of the lady of *Laüstic*, rebound uncannily” (Bloch 76). She was fast to reply, her husband’s death, it would be easy to arrange if Equitan were willing to help her. We can infer from the attitude of the woman who consciously accepts the prospect of an uncertain future that Equitan never intended, that she has lost her discernment about everything but love. Therefore, by speaking so, she reveals that she would in all her heart never have left her

lover's side, and she would never have thought of becoming a queen by marrying the king.

Equitan replies that he would do all she could demand of him, if he possibly could, "whether it turned out well or badly" (66). This answer is a concretization of the woman as his lord and himself as her vassal image he had drawn when he first confessed his love, and at the same time it tells us they are in a state of complete ethical confusion; as they are incapable of any other consideration besides love, they literally invert the metaphorical lord-vassal relations to the real feudal hierarchy (Kinoshita 47-48). The woman tells the king to go hunting on her husband's land, so that they can come to rest and bathe after the hunt in the forest. The woman explains that she plans to fill her husband's bathtub with boiling water to make him die suddenly without raising any suspicion, and the king replies he will do as she wishes. And about three months later, the woman prepares the ominous bath for her husband. However, as her husband rises early and goes out for a walk, she and Equitan cannot hold off their burning passion and make love on the lord's bed in front of the bathtub.

It is at this moment that the seneschal returns and sees the king and his wife lying together in full embrace. Equitan, "to hide his villainy", jumps "into the tub feet first, stark naked. He didn't stop to think what he was doing" (68). The King immediately lost his life in the scalding bathtub which was originally prepared for the death of his vassal. Seeing what happened to the king, the seneschal, as if he had turned into a cruel judge, "grabbed his wife at once and thrust her head first into the tub" (68). After telling the story of the death of the two lovers, Marie de France conveys the following lesson: "Whoever wants to hear some sound advice can profit from this example: he who plans evil for another may have that evil rebound back on him" (68). And she ends her story by the following comment, "all happened just as I've told you. The Bretons made a *lai* about it, about Equitan, his fate, and the woman who loved him so much" (68-69).

During the Carolingian Dynasty, it was considered a significant act of betrayal for a lord to commit adultery with a vassal's wife (Robertson 244). Also in those days, the crime of counterfeiting was considered a serious crime and was also punished by death in boiling water (Picherit 423). However, the deaths of two lovers in the last scene was not intended to reflect the actual penalties of the Middle Ages, but rather to give a meaningful, moreover ethical lesson to the audience through a punishment with symbolic meaning.

## Conclusion

Someone saw in *Equitan* a rejection and a departure from the ideal love, which was formerly expressed by numerous troubadours (Hoepffner 158), while another researcher viewed it as the opposite take on the basic principles of courtly love (Lazar 195). However, when we look at *Equitan* from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, it appears Marie de France paid particular attention in showing how love makes an individual lose all ethical consciousness, how social customs exert an ominous influence on personal lives, and finally how ethical confusion results in real disorder. Equitan, who was the king and judge, by two times stands at the crossroads of ethical choices, and chooses the symbolic and real role of vassal as a lover. When at the end of the work, Equitan exchanges his fate for his vassal's in the strangest figure of equality. Moreover, by entering in turn into the tub of their death, the two lovers also actualize an odd relationship of equality.

By showing that the lack of reason, the ignorance of taboos and the misunderstanding of the attributes of love lead to ethical confusion, Marie de France invites her readers to reconsider not only what equity between vassal and monarch, equity among lovers but also equity in the matters of love and power can be (Mikhaïlova 155). The king and his seneschal's wife are led to death by something resembling the passion of Racine's heroine Phèdre. As a result of the vassal's wife emphasis on a love based on equality and of the establishment of equity, so reminiscent of Equitan's name, the two people face a tragic end. If one borrows the expression of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century poet François Villon, one can say "Folles amours font les gens bestes" ("Foolish love makes people fools").<sup>1</sup> However, the present tragedy created by this lack of psychological and social equilibrium is not simply limited to the individual dimension. In a similar way that the adulterous love of Lancelot and the queen leads to the end of King Arthur's kingdom, the death of Equitan without an heir will bring chaos and disorder to a whole country, and there is no doubt that it would lead to terrible warfare with neighboring countries.

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1 François Villon, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet et Laëtitia Tabard, Paris, Gallimard, 2014, p. 73, line 629. English translation based on *Complete Poems*, ed. Barbara N. Sargent-Baur (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 97.

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