

# Voice and Body: Emotional Proximity and Physical Distance in Marie de France's 'Laustic'

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## *Abstract*

*Through the lens of feminist theoretical questions and gender studies, this paper explores the relationship between voice and body and the emotional and physical distance that occurs between genders in Marie de France's Laustic. As a medieval woman writer, Marie provides a textual space to examine the emotional closeness and psychological distance that occurs within the patriarchal structure that delineates gender relations within the convention of marriage. This lai or poetic narrative articulates the loss and pain incurred by segregation and the designation of woman as other, as well as the empowering pleasure that can be realised when one's voice is accepted and heard. The reciprocal space that is created when speaking and listening is equally exchanged transcends physical distance and allows a unique sense of emotional proximity to be established and explored. Although this medieval text offers a perspective which may seem far removed from the present cultural environment, it illuminates the existing affective dynamics between men and women with a poignant view of gender relations. Through the combined use of literary and cultural disciplines, this paper will navigate the different ranges of emotional intimacy and psychological detachment between genders in patriarchal social structures.*

Keywords: medieval, feminism, poetry, voice, body

Twelfth-century woman writer, Marie de France, demonstrates the resilience of the human voice as she provides a poignant view of gender relations within a medieval patriarchal social environment. Marie provides a textual space that resonates with a twentieth-century feminist theoretical lens as her writings provide an authentic representation of the feminine experience and the attempts made to repress the feminine voice as Other. While she denaturalises stereotypical identifications of gender, Marie reveals the varied degrees of emotional proximity and psychological distance that occurs with the culturally accepted performance of gender. Within the *lai* or lyrical poem *Laustic*, Marie contrasts two relationships with close attention given to the importance of voice and the repression of the feminine experience. As with many of Marie's works, *Laustic* pays attention to the female perspective. As Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken suggest, 'Marie imagines new possibilities in the form of worlds in which women could choose their own lovers . . . [and] imagine the ways in which those structures may be changed through women's desires and even women's agency, if only in a limited way' (11). Although the lady of *Laustic* does not achieve liberation from her repressed state, Marie allows the lady agency to have her experience seen and heard. Marie brings attention to the repression of the female voice and body as she reveals the range of emotional intimacy and distance that occurs between genders within the twelfth-century patriarchal social order.

But let us first take a closer look at Marie de France's position as a medieval woman writer and the cultural environment in which 'Laustic' was created. Marie (1160-1215) was part of a highly sophisticated Anglo-Norman aristocratic culture in which her claims of authorship set her apart from other female medieval writers (Finke 155-156, 219). 'Laustic' is one of the twelve octosyllabic romance poems or lyrical verse narratives that make up the *Lais*, a body of work presented by Marie as translations or adaptations of Breton tales to the French King and the Norman court (Finke 157). It is important to note, as Shulamith Shahar points out, that while courtly literature 'typified literature written on the inspiration of women, elevating their image and answering their psychological needs', it also 'emphasises the inner needs of man' (161). Although gender relations were allowed a certain freedom within the style of courtly love that was not condoned by the Church, the patriarchal social structure greatly influenced the portrayal of the feminine experience. Marie's authorial voice, however, presents another perspective that allows women to exist as three-dimensional beings. As Roberta Krueger states, '[i]n contrast to much of the chivalric literature where women are often passive objects or marginalized temptresses, Marie's female characters are central figures who exhibit courage and ingenuity' (176). In this way, Marie denaturalises the cultural identification of the female voice and body as Other, while she provides complex representations of the feminine experience that have the potential to evolve within her poetic work.

Before we begin to examine Marie's work, a brief review of the events of this *lai* may prove helpful. Marie begins 'Laustic', which she translates to mean 'nightingale in proper English' (Marie 155), by introducing the *lai's* three main characters as two knights and a lady, while referring to each character as

such for the duration of the poem. The protagonist (the lady) is married to one of the two knights introduced and lives next door to the other who is a bachelor. The lady and the unmarried knight fall in love through conversations that take place from her window and the exchange of physical possessions over the stone wall that separates their two abodes. This physical distance causes the extent of their relationship to consist solely of sight and sound, while they develop a certain degree of emotional intimacy through their shared proximity. They must of course keep their love hidden as the husband keeps the lady closely guarded within the home. After noticing the lady's frequent absences from her bed, the husband's jealous suspicions grow and he demands an explanation for her nocturnal behaviour. The lady states that she leaves her husband's side to listen to the song of the nightingale to which the husband responds by laughing and ordering the nightingale be caught. Once the husband has trapped the bird, he brings it to the lady, breaks its neck, and throws the corpse on the lady's breast. The lady mourns the bird and comes to accept that she must end the relationship with the unmarried knight for both their sakes. She wraps the bird in an embroidered cloth and sends it to her beloved, who in turn enshrines the nightingale in a jewelled box and carries it with him.

Marie first presents her three main characters by outlining the emotional and physical proximity they share within the *lai*. Using the convention of marriage, she addresses the lady's social position in relation to the husband's identity:

One [knight] had married a woman  
wise, courtly, and handsome;  
she set a wonderfully high value on herself,  
within the bounds of custom and usage. (Marie 155)

The lady sets value 'on herself' within the conventional space allotted her through marriage, while the husband's identity is built upon the quality of her gender performance. Some medieval writers emphasise women's class identity through marital status (Shahar 5). However, Marie presents the lady by highlighting the knight's marital status in her introduction. It is also interesting to note that, as Kinoshita and McCracken point out, the portrait of identity in medieval romance is 'often constituted less by personalized traits that serve to distinguish a unique individual than around a collocation of qualities suited to one's social station' (180). As Marie provides a distant, one-dimensional view of the husband's identity in relation to the lady, she reveals the extent to which the lady serves as an endorsement of the her husband's 'goodness' mirroring his value from her far-removed position as Other. Simone de Beauvoir speaks about the role of this position within the convention of marriage: 'Man dreams of an Other not only to possess her but also to be ratified by her . . . he wishes consideration from outside to confer an absolute value upon his life, his enterprises, and himself' (312). As Marie brings attention to the wife's social function within marriage, she illustrates the emotional distance that exists within the set 'bounds of custom' and the 'usage' that are prescribed to the lady according to her sex. While there are no depictions of animosity between husband and wife, Marie conveys a certain sense of emotional vacancy

and detachment in the relationship as it appears to be solely based on the conventional gender roles that have been allotted to them within the patriarchal social structure in which they exist.

As Marie presents the lady's role as a signifier of her husband's masculinity, she presents another dynamic of gender relations by illustrating the intimate nature of the lady's relationship with the unmarried knight. Unlike the husband, this knight does not require an Other to ratify his own self-worth: 'The other was a bachelor, well known among his peers for bravery and great valor' (Marie 155). Marie gives this knight a more developed depiction than the married knight as he pursues the lady from a respectful distance. He is also presented in such a way that is more emotionally accessible to the reader in regards to his proximity to the lady: 'He also loved his neighbour's wife; / he asked her, begged her so persistently' (Marie 155). Marie continues to reveal the growing emotional proximity between them through the lady's response:

And there was such good in him,  
that she loved him more than anything,  
as much for the good that she heard of him  
as because he was close by. (155)

The lady's love grows from what she discerns as 'good.' It is interesting to note how Marie makes a point to mention that the lady's love for him is also because 'he was close by.' It is not a love of convenience but a feeling generated by emotional proximity, especially given the distance between the lady and the husband, who has her 'closely guarded' in his physical absence (156). In this way, Marie goes on to accentuate the emotional closeness between the second knight and the lady in contrast with the physical distance of their surroundings:

Their houses were next door,  
and so were their rooms and their towers;  
there was no barrier or boundary  
except a high wall of dark stone.  
From the rooms where the lady slept,  
if she went to the window  
she could talk to her love  
on the other side, and he to her,  
and they could exchange their possessions,  
by tossing and throwing them. (156)

Marie shows the relationship to be a love based on emotional intimacy removed from physical contact. As they exchange conversation and physical possessions, their interactions are based in reciprocity; there is no role of Other to be assigned to either gender. Body and voice become one as the act of listening serves as an intimate form of pleasure that transcends space: 'there was scarcely anything that could disturb them, / they were both quite at ease' (Marie 156). However, certain restrictions remain upon their relationship and their ability to experience this sense of pleasure as the lady's voice can never be truly and completely realised.

While Marie brings attention to the range of emotional intimacy shared by the lady and her secret beloved, she places great significance on reciprocity between genders. Marie uses their surroundings to accentuate the lovers' bond; the birds that sing nearby serve as a metaphor for the lady's body and voice. Marie does so by speaking directly to her reader about the manner in which the knight is attentive to the lady's voice:

I'll tell you the truth about the knight:  
he listened to them intently  
and to the lady on the other side,  
both with words and looks. (156)

Marie places great emphasis on the importance of the act of listening and being attentive to both voice and body. The binaries of subject and Other are collapsed within this relationship as theirs is one based in mutuality and reciprocity. As Marie continues to demonstrate the dynamics of this exchange, she brings focus and attention to the female sensation of pleasure by allowing her male audience to share this experience. This combination of love and desire is magnified by the release of both voice and the body that transcends the physical and social barriers that remain between the two lovers.

While Marie demonstrates the emotional proximity between the knight and the lady, she reveals the contrasting nature of the emotionally distant relationship that exists between the lady and her husband. As he begins to notice the lady's ritual of leaving their bed in the middle of the night to stand by the window, he grows angry and demands she explain her actions. He is unable to respect her desires or consider her psychological needs within the relationship; therefore, he perceives any physical interest that is not directed towards him as a threat. In an effort to divert his suspicions, the lady answers with a false explanation to justify her nightly visits to the window:

"My lord," the lady answered him,  
"there is no joy in the world  
like hearing the nightingale sing.  
That's why I stand there.  
It sounds so sweet at night  
that it gives me great pleasure;  
it delights me so and I desire it  
that I cannot close my eyes. (157)

She offers her husband a reason that conceals her authentic voice and the emotional distance that stands between them. In doing so, the lady claims her desires with her voice as well as her body, and finds solace in the temporary physical distance she creates between her and her husband. Michelle Freeman argues that the lady 'resorts to the explanation to perpetuate her freedom, to allow for the emergence of her secret alternative identity—her true function and meaning to that coexist with her lifeless and prosaic identity as a wife jealously guarded by her husband' (868). However, the lady's attempts to lead this double life cannot be sustained within her repressed environment, and the husband, unable to recognise the emotional distance between them, seeks to take back

control of the physical proximity of the relationship:

When her lord heard what she said  
he laughed in anger and ill will.  
He set his mind on one thing:  
to trap the nightingale. (157)

This response contrasts the attentive ‘listening’ of the other knight, as the husband hears her words but rejects her voice. As Beauvoir states, ‘[Man] accepts woman in the masculine world only in making a servant of her and frustrating her transcendence’ (316). In this way, the husband can only be satisfied in the dissolution of her desires by taking possession of the nightingale and exerting the totality of his spousal authority over her voice and body.

The husband’s subsequent actions reinforce the emotional distance that divides him from the lady, as he makes it his mission to hunt the innocent bird. His ego driven response is fully realised when he brings the captured bird into the lady’s chambers:

“Lady,” he said, “where are you?”  
Come here! Speak to us!  
I have trapped the nightingale  
that kept you awake so much.  
From now on you can lie in peace:  
he will never again awaken you. (158)

He does not respect the intimacy of the lady’s space; rather, he commands that she physically appear before him and ‘speak’. When she asks for him to release the bird, he kills it ‘out of spite’ instead:

He broke its neck in his hands  
too vicious an act  
and threw the body on the lady;  
her shift was stained with blood,  
a little, on her breast.  
Then he left the room. (158)

Violence becomes his last means of upholding his ego as subject for he is unable to comprehend her voice as more than Other. She is no longer in control of her own body; as Helene Cixous describes it: ‘A Woman without a body, dumb, and blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow’ (418). By violating her body and physically removing himself from her presence, he confines her voice and body within a repressed state and regains of the physical and emotional distance that remains between them.

Left alone to grieve the painful reality of her loss, the lady is forced to accept the terms of her social position as Other. Marie describes the lady’s initial response: ‘The lady took the little body; / she wept hard and cursed / those who betrayed the nightingale’ (Marie 158). Within this emotive state, she resigns herself to the situation and chooses to distance herself from the relationship

as a means of preservation for both herself and the knight: “Alas,” she said, “now I must suffer” (Marie 158). Joan Ferrante points out that Marie shows the interiority of the lady’s thoughts as she weighs the possible dangers of her situation like some of Marie’s other female characters who possess ‘the need to take control of their lives’ (197). In doing so, the lady takes action and chooses to communicate with the knight one last time: ‘I shall send him the nightingale / and relate the adventure’ (Marie 159). This symbolic act of writing allows the lady to regain access to the emotional proximity shared with her lover one last time, while transposing her voice and body through the symbolic imagery of the bird. She delivers the last exchange as she wraps the bird in a cloth woven with gold and embroidered in writing and dictates a message to her servant to deliver to the knight (Marie 158). By relating the message to the lady’s secret lover, the lady gains mobility through the use of her voice. The servant serves as a vehicle that preserves the lady’s disembodied voice, while both the knight and the reader recognise the nightingale as a textual representation of the lady’s voice and the great restrictions placed upon it:

When everything had been told and revealed to the knight,  
after he had listened well,  
he was very sad about the adventure,  
but he wasn’t mean or hesitant. (159)

Again Marie stresses the virtue of listening. Marie places emphasis on the quality of listening that greatly contrasts the husband’s ‘deaf male ear’, which Cixous says ‘hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine’ (418). In this way, Marie provides a glimpse into the interiority of the knight’s thoughts that reveals another dimension of gender relations undefined by social conventions.

Following the exchange between the knight and the servant, the knight responds to the message by continuing the lady’s narrative as he embraces their suffering as one of the last experiences they can share together. Freeman addresses the nightingale’s ability to unite the knight and the lady, as it serves as an outlet for their voices: ‘The bird allows the lovers to communicate, indirectly, one last time, as it travels from one interior to another. . . The bird will constitute the means by which, at last, the story of the lovers will be communicated to the outside world’ (869). This last textual exchange is enacted as the nightingale becomes once again a juxtaposed object which serves to preserve the lady’s voice:

He had a small vessel fashioned,  
with no iron or steel in it;  
it was all pure gold and good stones  
very precious and very dear;  
the cover was very carefully attached.  
He placed the nightingale inside  
and then he had the casket sealed  
he carried it with him always. (159)



The nightingale becomes enshrined as a symbol of the relationship that serves to fill the physical and emotional void that separates the two lovers. As Kinoshita and McCracken suggest, ‘The sealed golden coffer that holds the dead nightingale and that the knight keeps with him suggests that the love affair is transformed into a commemorative story that circulates with the knight’ (152). While the lady remains isolated and repressed within the role of Other, the bond of intimacy she shared with the knight is given a certain degree of mobility even if it can never be physically realised. Marie concludes the *lai* with a gesture towards the continued transformation of their story: ‘This adventure was told, / it could not be concealed for long’ (159). She reinstates the name of the *lai* and thus further extends the essence of their bond: ‘The Bretons made a lai about it / which men call ‘The Nightingale’ (159). This final narrative act separates the nightingale from the lovers’ voices through metaphoric attribution allowing Marie to inscribe her own voice as a woman writer upon the body of the *lai* itself. As the nightingale becomes the object that mirrors its subjects, ‘Laustic’ becomes the symbolic textual space which Marie creates for the lady’s voice to exist and be heard by both men and women alike.

As Marie breaks from culturally idealised representations of gender relations within *Laustic*, she offers an alternate perspective of the restrictions placed upon the feminine voice and body within twelfth-century patriarchal structure. With her juxtaposition of relationship dynamics, Marie demonstrates how emotional proximity based in reciprocity transcends physical distance as well as the loss both genders incur with the segregation of woman as Other. Krueger points out that as Marie ‘portrays the desire, transgression, and transformation of the characters who read and write, Marie invites her readers to reflect upon their own activity as readers and interpreters and their investment in the making of fiction’ (177). This extended invitation to the modern reader can prompt further reflection on existing gender relation dynamics. As Marie brings attention to the repression of feminine voice and body, she creates a textual space where feminine and masculine experiences can find liberation from restrictive cultural norms and be heard and celebrated by future generations.

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### **Biography**

Jessica Zisa received her Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and Writing from Marylhurst University in 2013. She presented 'The Representation of Feminine Power in Lanval and The Knight of the Cart' at the Northwest Undergraduate Conference on Literature in 2012. In 2014, she was invited to present at University College London's Society for Comparative Cultural Inquiry's conference 'Distance and Proximity' and was a panellist at the Society of Textual Scholarship International Interdisciplinary Conference as well as the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association Conference.