

Marie de France
Identity and Authorship in Translation

Emma Campbell

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The twelfth-century writer today known as ‘Marie de France’ is one of the few medieval authors generally known by name within – sometimes beyond – academic circles. This authorial identifier is a sixteenth-century coinage based on Marie’s self-presentation in a fable collection, where the francophone writer evidently working in England for an aristocratic patron claims to be ‘from France’ (‘Marie ai nun, si sui de France’, *Fables*, Epilogue, 4).¹ The Marie who signs this work appears to be a settler in Britain positioned between two francophone cultures: that of the English nobility and that of Continental France – most likely the Île-de-France. The writer we today refer to as ‘Marie de France’ has consequently been hot property in English as well as French literary studies. The extensive scholarly attention Marie has received has secured her place among the earliest named women authors working in French and established her significance for English and French literary histories. Questions of authorship and attribution have, understandably, been a major focal point in these endeavours. Such studies have sometimes attempted to connect Marie to particular religious orders or royal houses. Arguments have thus been made to the effect that Marie was the Abbess of Shaftesbury, half-sister to Henry II; that she can be identified as the Abbess of Reading; that she could have been Marie de Meulan or Marie de Boulogne; and that she might have been Mary Becket, sister to the martyred Archbishop Thomas of Canterbury.² Though tantalising, such claims about Marie’s historical identity nonetheless remain speculative. All we really know about Marie is her name and that she may have written up to four works in French aimed at patrons and audiences in late twelfth-century England (c. 1160–90). The texts most frequently attributed to her range across the major medieval genres of courtly, didactic, and religious writing: the *Lais* (a collection of short stories on Celtic themes), *Ysopë* (a fable collection), and the *Espurgatoire Saint Patrice* (a text about Saint Patrick’s discovery of

purgatory). A case has also been made for Marie's authorship of a vernacular life of St Audrey, though this attribution currently commands less scholarly consensus.³ The scarcity of evidence concerning Marie's identity means we cannot be certain the same author composed even the three works conventionally ascribed to this female writer. As attempts to identify her attest, 'Marie' was a common name for women in medieval Christendom. What is more, the linguistic distinctiveness of the texts that bear this authorial signature seems to point to their composition by four separate individuals.⁴ The vibrancy of late twelfth-century Anglo-Norman literary culture, which included women as readers, patrons, and scribes, as well as writers, also means it is not inconceivable that there was more than one woman composing vernacular texts under the same moniker. In other words, we might be dealing with a single female writer, but this corpus could equally represent the work of up to four different Maries.

Celebrating a twelfth-century female author who can rival male contemporaries undoubtedly has its value. Nevertheless, the cult of authorship that has developed around Marie's name in scholarly work sometimes inadvertently overshadows aspects of this corpus relevant to a multilingual understanding of medieval women's literary culture. Until recently, scholarship on Marie as a 'French' writer working in Britain painted her as a uniquely talented author positioned within the franco-phone literary canon. These traditional accounts tend to emphasise the female author's connection to nationalising literary histories that downplay the polyglot nature of the culture that produced the works attributed to Marie, along with its reliance on translation.⁵ This emphasis has shifted in more recent scholarship, even if modern disciplinary boundaries continue to determine – and to circumscribe – the critical reception of this corpus.⁶ Although a comprehensive examination of the links between work attributed to Marie and its broader, multilingual context exceeds the scope of this chapter, I consider here what it might mean to see Marie (singular or plural) as a participant in a polyglot culture that valued translation and adaptation as much as individual authorship. This approach offers a means of demonstrating the embeddedness of Marie's writing in translation, as well as the relevance this has for questions of gender and language.

The work attributed to Marie encourages us to view her writing within textual networks. As scholars have often indicated, Marie is not an author in today's sense of the term. Medieval textual culture challenges modern assumptions about authorship as a form of inspired, autonomous creativity by embedding literary production in more collaborative practices, ranging

from the commissioning of works to the translation, paraphrase, citation, and copying of texts in manuscript. Marie's presentation of her work accordingly connects textual composition to the commissioning, reading, and transmission of other works, as well as to translation and adaptation. The General Prologue to the most complete collection of Marie's *lais* in the Harley manuscript (British Library, Harley MS 978) dedicates the work to a 'noble king' (usually identified as Henry II of England) and suggests the project intentionally preserves Breton oral compositions that might otherwise vanish. Marie aligns this conservationist endeavour with the translation of antique sources into the vernacular already popular among contemporary writers at the Angevin court, while dismissing that option as already oversubscribed and therefore less appealing (*Lais*, Prologue, ll. 28–42).⁷ When introducing her fable collection, Marie situates her commission within an illustrious didactic tradition that she traces back to the Roman emperor Romulus and to Aesop, who translated the fables from Greek into Latin for his imperial master (*Fables*, Prologue, ll. 12–40). The edifying text's production in this case explicitly includes both translation and a collaboration between noble patron and writer that equally belongs to the textual tradition that contextualises Marie's collection. Later, in the epilogue to the *Fables*, Marie's claim that she was working from a source by King Alfred further connects her work to a tradition of writing and translation in English still tangible after the Conquest (ll. 13–18). In the *Espurgatoire*, Marie similarly attributes her motivation for writing to a noble patron, while targeting her vernacular translation of a Latin text at simple folk who implicitly lack her literacy and education (*Espurgatoire*, ll. 1–48).⁸ Marie's writing – like that of other medieval authors – is thus invested in interpersonal and interlinguistic processes of commissioning, adaptation, compilation, and translation. Her qualities as an author can only fully be understood within that collaborative, polyglot setting.

The works bearing Marie's name further locate the activity of composing and translating into French within a broader multilingual context especially relevant to Angevin Britain. The sources and influences for works identified with Marie situate this corpus at the confluence of French, Latin, Breton, Celtic, English, and Arabic cultures and languages. A striking feature of the three texts most commonly identified with Marie is the writer's explicit engagement with the vernacular multilingualism of their English context. Insular writers working in French frequently point to their use of Latin sources; the commentary we find in Marie's texts on the translation of material into French is therefore relatively conventional. More unusually, her work contains references to languages including

Breton and English vernaculars, as well as idioms more widely used for written texts during this period, such as Latin. Though, as far as we know, Marie composed only in French, the works attributed to her bear witness to knowledge of multiple languages. The *Lais* claim to derive from oral Breton sources and include what are presented as English as well as Breton terms; *Ysopë* evokes Aesop's Greek-to-Latin translations while also mentioning a (now lost) English version, which Marie claims is her source; finally, the *Espurgatoire*, which translates into French an identifiable Latin text by an English Cistercian monk, also evokes the need for linguistic interpreting that results from interactions between the Irish population and the clerical settlers of Ireland, including St Patrick himself. This multilingual frame of reference anchors this corpus in the linguistic environment of Angevin Britain, with its francophone court, socially mixed community of bilingual English and French speakers, mass population of anglophones, and Celtic-speaking minorities. It also reflects a geopolitical situation in which Angevin dominion reached beyond the English kingdom to Ireland and Brittany, as well as to duchies and counties on the Continent. The Anglo-Norman, Angevin culture in which these texts were written was profoundly multilingual and multicultural: it tapped into rich transnational resources, while also privileging the elaboration of insular histories and institutions. The details of this situation are not extensively discussed in Marie's writing; nonetheless, these texts deliberately contextualise the activity of composition in French within a network of languages relevant to Angevin Britain and the aspirations of its ruling classes.

How, then, do the languages of the culture in which Marie was working shape the French texts attributed to her? And what is the significance of this for thinking about the female writer's position within a literary culture in which women actively participated? The choice of French had a particular resonance for writers working in England, including women writers. Marie – if indeed there was only one of her – was by no means the only multilingual woman composing French texts in Britain in the twelfth century. Clemence of Barking's theologically and stylistically accomplished translation of the Latin life of St Catherine of Alexandria is testament to that, as is the anonymous nun of Barking's life of St Edward the Confessor (a woman who may be Clemence herself, though, as ever, concrete evidence is hard to come by).⁹ The religious works attributed to Marie (the *Espurgatoire* and, possibly, the *Vie sainte Audrée*) are, from this perspective, more typical of contemporary women's vernacular writing in England. Though the writing portfolio attributed to Marie – which includes works from secular, courtly genres as well as religious ones – fits the profile of well-known male

contemporaries, including Continental French writers such as Chrétien de Troyes, the stakes of writing French in England in this period are distinct from those associated with Continental uses of the language. As a preferred vernacular of England's elite, French had an additional prestige that may have appealed to writers such as Marie and Clemence – not to mention the female patrons and readers who supported the vibrant culture of French literary production in such circles.

If we look to the texts themselves, works attributed to Marie not only draw upon a networked, collaborative model of authorship that encompasses and passes through translation but also highlight her role as a woman who participates in – even guarantees the continued vitality of – that network. In all of these texts, the female writer locates herself within a broader tradition dominated by male authorities and, in doing so, subtly underscores the dependence of that tradition on her own efforts. These texts also thematise the work of textual production and translation in other ways, some of which explicitly include women or emphasise their contributions. In line with the different model of authorship that her writing represents, Marie does not necessarily make herself or other women points of origin for textual production; rather, women are part of collaborative networks that produce, translate, read, circulate, and modify narratives in textual and non-textual forms. Indeed, no single model of women's narrative agency emerges from this corpus. As we shall see, Marie's depiction of women's roles in textual-translational networks and her positioning as the francophone writer behind the vernacular text are calibrated differently in the various works traditionally ascribed to her.

Critics have often emphasised women's depiction in the *Lais* as readers, writers, composers, or storytellers.¹⁰ This attention to women's involvement in the genesis of the *lai* is not restricted to those associated with Marie: it is also a feature of the genre more broadly.¹¹ In the most complete compendium of Marie's twelve *Lais* – conventionally known as the 'Harley' collection, after the manuscript that transmits these works – women occupy various roles in the networks that generate the composition we encounter in Marie's French text. These roles can have negative as well as positive outcomes. Women's speech acts are narrative catalysts in *Equitan*, where a lady in an adulterous relationship with a king plots to murder her husband, and in *Le Fresne*, where a woman's malicious gossip about how her female neighbour's twins were conceived rebounds on her when she herself gives birth to twin girls. In other cases, women initiate, construct, or transmit the tale that becomes the *lai* Marie recounts in her turn. In *Yonec*, an unhappily married woman prays for an adventure like

those she has heard others recount and has her wish granted by the appearance of Muldumarec, a bird-knight with whom she has a son, Yonec. When Muldumarec is killed by her jealous husband, the lady keeps the adventure a secret with the aid of a magic ring until Yonec is grown; then, as Muldumarec predicted, she reveals the story to her son before his father's tomb, prompting Yonec to slay his stepfather. The simultaneous occupation, transmission, and elaboration of the story is also a family affair initiated by a female character in *Milun*. In this *lai*, a young noblewoman who begins a relationship with an outstanding knight called Milun becomes pregnant with his child and instructs him to take the baby to her sister in Northumberland, to be raised in secret. The lady asks Milun to pass on a ring and a letter she has written, which names him as the child's father and gives an account of her own adventure. These tokens are transmitted to the child when he reaches maturity. For twenty years the lovers continue secretly to correspond with one another through letters hidden among the feathers of a swan, while their son grows into a young knight determined to live up to his illustrious parentage. Milun eventually encounters his son in combat at a tournament and is, for the first time, unhorsed by his opponent. The young man's ring, along with the story of his parentage taken from his mother's letter, confirm his identity to his jubilant father. On returning from the tournament, Milun receives a final missive from his lady indicating her husband has recently died, enabling the pair to be reunited and married by their son. *Yonec* and *Milun* thus emphasise women's roles in the written as well as the oral transmission of the tale that eventually becomes the *lai*. In *Chaitivel*, a noblewoman is presented even more explicitly as the work's composer, though the *lai* once again represents the creative process that brings it into being as a shared enterprise. *Chaitivel* relates the story of a lady with four valiant lovers, three of whom die in a tournament. The fourth lover survives, albeit seriously injured, and is cared for by the lady. To commemorate her deep sadness, the lady announces she will make a *lai* that she proposes to call *Quatre Dols* (The Four Sorrows); her surviving lover nonetheless convinces her to alter the title to *Le Chaitivel* (The Wretched One), in recognition of the particular suffering he endures at being near his beloved but unable to act on his feelings for her. *Chaitivel*'s double title and narration of its own composition thus points to the open-ended, originless nature of poetic composition, which involves negotiation between male and female actors positioned differently within the story, as well as among writers and audiences who reshape and reinterpret the *lai* in their turn.¹² Depictions of literary production such as these draw attention to women's

participation in compositional networks; they invite audiences to reflect on Marie's poetic practice and uses of language, as well as on their own involvement as readers in the collaborative production of the work.

Laiüstic and *Chevrefoil* offer further examples of tales where women's involvement in the networks underpinning the French text intersect with Marie's multilingual framing of the *lai* and her interest in translation as a form of literary composition.¹³ In both cases, Marie translates the Celtic title of the *lai* into one or more languages, including French. These interlinguistic translations are not principally aimed at providing French equivalents of terms unfamiliar to medieval contemporaries. Rather, Marie uses interlingual translation to draw attention to the porous boundaries between languages which her francophone audience would almost certainly have encountered by other means and, in turn, to relate this to the thematics of translation developed in the works themselves. Translation is, in other words, used self-consciously in these *lais* to underline and to comment on the text's composition – a process that includes female characters within the French text as well as the female writer who transmits it.

Laiüstic foregrounds the relationship between the translation of bodies and stories on the one hand and its own poetic elaboration on the other. Similarly to the Harley *lais* already mentioned, it depicts a woman's collaborative involvement in those processes as part of the narrative Marie translates into written French. The crux of the story is a covert love affair: a lady and her neighbour are in the habit of meeting at night at the windows of their adjoining homes. When the lady's husband demands an explanation for her night-time wanderings, she tells him she gets up to listen to the nightingale. In response, her husband contrives to trap a nightingale, kills it before her, and throws its body at her, staining her dress with blood. Having lost her excuse for rising at night, the lady resolves to send the bird and an explanation of the adventure to her lover; she wraps the nightingale's body in an embroidered cloth and sends it to him with an orally delivered message. On receiving the gift and the tale, the knight places the wrapped bird in a specially made casket, which he keeps with him. The story, we are told, soon circulated and was made into a *lai*.

Laiüstic has frequently been read as a story about the process of poetic composition behind the work itself.¹⁴ It also highlights the interplay between preservation and loss that characterises translation as a mechanism of textual transmission. The nightingale that gives its name to the *lai* begins life as a fabrication to conceal an adulterous affair. When

its real-life counterpart is discovered and killed, the body then undergoes a process of material and textual translation that eventually leads to the creation of the *lai* that Marie translates in her turn. The intimate connection between the nightingale and the accretion of narrative elements that makes up the *lai* means the significance of the bird can only be understood in relation to the story Marie tells. At the same time, the meaning of the nightingale shifts as it is translated. The bird that lends its name to the *lai* initially stands for a secret that cannot be openly disclosed; this meaning evolves as the bird the lady dreamt up as an excuse materialises as a living creature that is killed, then is subject to reinterpretation and misinterpretation by characters within the narrative. The woman's use of the bird as an excuse fails to convince her husband, who plays along with her story while intuiting its distortion of the truth. The lady's husband correctly interprets her lie; his response brutally commits her to it, by substituting a real bird for the lady's courtly fiction. If the husband understands the lady's tale in a way that is both true and false, her lover seems partially to misinterpret the significance of the nightingale she sends him. Whereas the lady's gift commemorates her adventure and continues her communication with her lover, the knight instead prefers to venerate the bird as the symbol of a dead rather than a living love affair, transforming the lady's gift into a relic. The *lai* thus highlights the process of displacement that underwrites poetic composition and transmission, connecting that process to the material and textual translations performed by male and female characters, which ultimately constitute the work Marie writes in French.

Marie's use of interlinguistic translation in presenting this text can be read in this light. The opening of the *lai* outlines in miniature the process within the story itself, whereby the lady's *aventure* is transformed through translation into a poetic composition that subjects the nightingale to different interpretations:

Une aventure vus dirai
 Dunt li Bretun firent un lai;
 Laüstic ad nun, ceo m'est vis,
 Si l'apelent en lur païs;
 Ceo est russignol en franceis
 E nihtegale en dreit engleis.

(*Laüstic*, ll. 1–6)

(I will tell you an adventure, which the Bretons made into a *lai*. I believe it has the name 'Laüstic' and is so called in their country; that is 'Rossignol' in French and 'Nightingale' in correct English.)

Marie's glossing of the nightingale's name focuses on the process of translation while underscoring the partial untranslatability of the term

Marie provides as a title. Even though the Breton word is translated linguistically in these opening lines, 'laüstic' is used throughout Marie's French text to refer to both bird and *lai*. These usages underline the singularity of this word by making its meaning dependent on the context of the story itself: rather than speaking of 'the nightingale' in French (*russignol*), Marie refers to 'laüstic' as a foreign term that is comprehensible in context but requires an additional effort of interpretation. The non-translation of the title thus encapsulates an important feature of Marie's *lai*: the nightingale's meaning only becomes apparent in relation to the story Marie recounts, while also shifting as the fictional bird becomes a living creature, a dead body, a gift, a relic. By continuing to use the Breton term, Marie presents her audience with a word that advertises its own linguistic and conceptual distinctiveness. The meaning of 'laüstic' becomes progressively apparent not only through the linguistic translation offered in the introductory lines, but also through the translations of the story itself.

Chevrefoil similarly draws attention to the process of translation and transmission that underwrites the text's composition – a process that once again includes a female character. The subject matter of this *lai* is connected to the hugely popular medieval story of Tristan and Yseut: a pair of courtly lovers whose adulterous relationship involves betrayal of King Mark, Tristan's uncle and Yseut's husband as well as the pair's sovereign. Marie's *lai* fixes on a small detail of this vast story matter: an encounter in the Cornish forest that Tristan engineers while in exile from the royal court. Having received news of the court's celebration of Pentecost in Tintagel, Tristan lies in wait near the path he knows the queen will have to take. He carves a message into a piece of wood, which he leaves by the roadside for Yseut to see; recognising this sign from her beloved, the queen leaves the path and the couple enjoy a brief reunion before separating once more. Upon returning to his native Wales, Tristan – possibly at Yseut's behest – composes the *lai* that Marie retells in French, to commemorate the lovers' tryst and the words exchanged between them.

In *Chevrefoil*, Marie once again uses interlinguistic translation to highlight the process that brings the *lai* into being. She translates the *lai*'s title into French and English; this time, however, she makes no explicit mention of the Celtic (Breton? Welsh? Cornish?) term upon which these translations are based, and introduces her bilingual gloss of the title in the text's concluding lines rather than at its opening. In the body of the text, Marie uses the French term 'chevrefoil' (honeysuckle) to refer to the plant and to the *lai* that bears its name. One of the effects of Marie's omission of the Celtic title, when seen alongside her allusion to English

and French terms at the end of the *lai*, is to privilege the process of translation over the rendering of a putative source. In contrast to *Laüstic*, what this accentuates is how translation can conceal or suppress what it ostensibly transmits. The absence of Tristan's title is echoed in the construction of this story, which revolves around a message never explicitly communicated by the *lai* itself. Just as the Celtic name remains shrouded in secrecy, so the content of the message that it commemorates is hidden within the French translation that recreates and partially transmits it.

The communication around which the *lai* revolves once again highlights women's collaborative input into the work of literary composition, while leaving the nature of that input ambiguous. The *lai* makes the communication between Tristan and Yseut a central focus without explicitly conveying any of its content.¹⁵ *Chevrefoil's* epilogue re-emphasises the relationship between the commemorative function of the *lai* and its depiction of a communication partially omitted from the work itself:

Pur la joie qu'il ot eüe
 De s'amie qu'il ot veüe
 E pur ceo k'il aveit escrit,
 Si cum la reïne l'ot dit,
 Pur les paroles remembrer,
 Tristram, ki bien saveit harper,
 En aveit fet un nuvel lai;
 Asez briefment le numerai:
 Gotelef l'apelent en engleis,
 Chevrefoil le nument Franceis.
 Dit vus en ai la verité,
 Del lai que j'ai ici cunté.

(*Chevrefoil*, ll. 107–18)

(Because of the joy he experienced at seeing his beloved and because of what he had written, just as the queen had said/asked him to/told him, in order to preserve the memory of those words, Tristan, who was an accomplished harpist, composed a new *lai*. I will name it briefly: it is called *Gotelef* in English and *Chevrefoil* by the French. I have [now] told you the truth about the *lai* that I have recounted here.)

If the words exchanged between the lovers are not communicated directly, so too the process of composition mentioned in the text remains opaque. In the context of Tristan's creation of the *lai*, Marie's allusion to what the queen says ('si cum la reïne l'ot dit') makes it difficult to pinpoint the precise nature of Yseut's contribution to this creative endeavour. It is unclear whether the queen dictates the *lai* that Tristan composes, whether she instructs him to compose the work, or whether Tristan simply takes it upon himself to

commemorate Yseut's words. In any event, Tristan's *lai* memorialises his communion with the queen while withholding the words exchanged between the lovers from other readers or listeners. This gap between word and referent is echoed by Marie's presentation of her title, which omits the Celtic name of Tristan's original composition but provides French and English glosses for it. As in *Laiüstic*, the purpose of interlinguistic translation is not merely functional here, but emphatic. Whereas *Laiüstic* translates a Breton term that replaces any French or English equivalents in the text, *Chevrefoil*'s use of such equivalents underscores the absence of the suppressed Celtic title. Thus, in this closing presentation of the *lai*, what Marie's translations underscore is, on the one hand, the absence of the written and spoken words commemorated by her text and, on the other hand, the way translation nonetheless serves to convey the import of those words. The lovers' exchanges, like Tristan's original title, are experienced through a translation that is inevitably incomplete and which folds women's contributions to textual composition and transmission into a collaboration that passes through various written and spoken languages.

Ysopë (after Aesop, translator of the fables) – the work for which Marie was most known in her own time – explores a different kind of relationship between text, language, and translation. As well as emanating from textual traditions that explicitly encompass Greek, Latin, and English, Marie's fable collection bears the marks of Arabic influences that probably emerged from twelfth-century Arabic-European cultural exchange.¹⁶ The first forty fables in *Ysopë* derive from an eleventh-century Latin work known as the *Romulus Nilantii*, which was an important source of Christian didacticism in the twelfth century; the remaining sixty-two can be linked more diffusely to a range of other sources, including Arabic fable collections such as the *Kalilah wa Dimnah*. Though there is no record of the source Marie claims for her work, comparison with the traditions from which these fables are likely to stem suggests her version adapts the material to a twelfth-century feudal context, focusing on ethical, political, and religious values regarded by contemporaries as essential to rulership.¹⁷ Her dedication of the work to an English count suggests such changes were made with a particular target audience in mind. Fables draw upon a broader cast of characters than the *Lais*, including the peasantry as well as non-human creatures; these tales often feature verbal trickery or ruse among animals as well as humans, before offering a moralising gloss that interprets the meaning of the story for readers or listeners. For example, Fable 13 in *Ysopë* recounts how a fox outwits a crow that has stolen a cheese, by flattering the bird's pride. The fox exclaims within earshot of the crow

that the bird's unparalleled beauty would be complete if its voice were as beautiful as its looks, prompting the crow to open its beak to sing, thereby dropping the cheese at the fox's feet. Marie's moralising gloss focuses on the pride and stupidity of those who fall for flattery and lies and who dispense their goods unwisely. This tale thus acts as a warning to her aristocratic audience against persuasive uses – and misuses – of language to gain social advantage.

Fables featuring verbal trickery foreground narrative production and translation in a way distinct from the *Lais* and offer a correspondingly different vision of women's roles within those processes. The fables' extraction of moral messages from the stories they recount might be seen as a form of translation, yet these texts do not usually connect moralisation to interlinguistic forms of translation integrated into the work itself. Marie's adaptations in *Ysopë* occasionally diminish the anti-feminist tenor of her sources.¹⁸ Far more so than in the *Lais*, however, the contributions of human, female characters in the fables tend to have a misogynist inflection. Perhaps not coincidentally, many of these women are depicted as lower class rather than aristocratic. Though the morals of the fables in question do not necessarily dwell upon gendered trickery, women's speech – similarly to that of creatures like the fox – has a potency often used to deceive or misguide. In some cases, there is an implicit recognition of women's superior wit, even as their trickery is taken as a negative example. For instance, in Fable 45, a peasant sees his wife disappearing into the forest with her male lover. Instead of denying her behaviour, the wife claims she must be at death's door, as other female relatives of hers were also seen accompanied by a young man shortly before they died. She instructs her husband to summon her family so they can divide up their belongings, whereupon she will immediately retire to a nunnery. In a panic, the peasant begs his wife not to leave him and retracts his accusation. The woman capitalises on her advantage to make her husband swear in church that he has not seen her with any man – and much more besides. The brief moral lesson accompanying this fable focuses first on women's guile and then on those whose trickery exceeds even the devil's cunning. Fable 72 similarly highlights the power of women's speech to shape others' perceptions of reality and thus to determine a course of events, while presenting the consequences of this as far more serious. In this tale, the mutually beneficial relationship between a peasant and a serpent is irreparably damaged by the intervention of the peasant's wife. The (grammatically feminine) serpent in this story is a figure of courtliness, wisdom, and generosity who, much like a feudal lord, enriches

the peasant who sustains her: the peasant brings the serpent milk twice a day and is repaid with the know-how to cultivate his land, as well as material wealth. When the peasant repeats to his wife the serpent's declaration that the slightest fault on his part would break their bond, the woman recommends that her husband kill the creature so as to free himself of the worry such a threat entails. Marie's use of free indirect discourse at this juncture communicates the agency of the wife's words on her husband's thought processes, relaying in the third person how the man should go about double-crossing the snake:

Ele li respunt hastivement,
 S'il en voleit sun conseil feire,
 Qu'il en purreit a bon chef treire:
 Ocie la, si fera mut bien,
 Puis ne la crendra de nule rien;
 En dute en est, ore en sa merci,
 Bien se deit deliverer de li,
 N'avera dute de sun mesfet;
 Le buket li porte plein de leit,
 Puis si l'asie a tere jus,
 Si s'en traïe un poi ensus;
 Quant la serpent vendra avant,
 Sa hache tienge bien trenchant,
 Si la fierge si durement
 Que n'i ait mes recouvrement.

(*Fables*, 72, ll. 30–44)

(She [the wife] hastily replies to him [her husband] that, if he were to follow her advice, he could bring matters to a good conclusion. Kill her [the serpent] – that would be a good thing, then he won't have anything more to fear. He fears her and is currently at her mercy, he should free himself of her; he won't worry about doing something wrong; he should carry the bucket full of milk to her, then put it on the ground, step back a little, and when the serpent comes out, grab his sharp axe and strike her so hard that she will never recover.)

Though the peasant woman's advice to her husband might not appear unreasonable, especially given the medieval associations of serpents who promise to lavish wisdom on humankind in Genesis, the feudal colouring of the reciprocity between *vilain* and serpent in Marie's text makes the moral stakes of the wife's counsel crystal clear. Indeed, in a comparable way to the wife's betrayal of her werewolf husband in *Bisclavret* (one of the Harley *Lais*), Marie here presents a course of action that seems understandable in context as a form of treachery that draws the negative associations of the non-human creature in question onto the human, female character.

Rather than telling a story about a deceptive serpent, the fable instead focuses on the wife's deceptively bad advice, which irreversibly unleashes upon the peasant's family the wrath of their former protector. When compared with the moralisation in Latin versions, Marie considerably develops the theme of bad counsel, which is pertinent to the feudal context of her didactic message, while passing through a conventionally misogynist devaluation of women's speech.

Far more so than the *Lais*, *Ysopë*'s depiction of women's involvement in narrative production thus tends to distinguish Marie's literary activity from the stories woven by female characters. If the fables spotlight women's capacity to harness the power of language for themselves, as well as that of men and non-human creatures, the moral interpretations of this potency often warn readers against heeding women's words. In this way, Marie's translations repeat rather than overturn conventional stereotypes about women's speech. Even if her moralisations convert these stories into universal lessons for the ruling classes, they do not explicitly challenge the misogyny of their subject matter. The *Lais* and *Ysopë* consequently position the female writer differently with regard to her material. Marie's self-presentation as the work's translator in the epilogue that concludes her fable collection gestures towards a more positive model for educated noblewomen. The epilogue presents the female writer as learned and shrewd: she is the conduit for the transmission of this text and refuses to be forgotten and have her work appropriated by male clerics (*Fables*, Epilogue, ll. 1–12). Marie's self-portrait here reveals a woman using her linguistic skills for the right purposes, to instruct rather than mislead. This nonetheless implies a contrast with many of the – usually lower class – human women depicted in the collection itself, rather than an identification with them.

In the *Espurgatoire*, Marie uses translation as a mode of writing that not only transmits textual content but that also has the capacity to uncover spiritual truths situated at the limit of what human language can express. In doing so, she again implicitly aligns her work as a female translator with the translational networks depicted in the text she renders in French. Unlike the processes of story-making seen in other works, however, the intradiegetic networks in the *Espurgatoire* pass principally through men. The interest the *Espurgatoire* demonstrates in translation's revelatory capacities is comparable to the uses to which vernacular translation is put in other contemporary religious works, including Anglo-Norman texts by women such as Clemence of Barking. More unusually, Marie's text situates its exploration of translation's revelatory potential in a purgatorial otherworld

located in Ireland, at the western limit of the Angevin kingdom and of the known world. Marie's description of purgatory consequently confronts her audience with phenomena that defy description or comprehension, while contextualising this by reference to a linguistic situation on the outskirts of Angevin territories. Translation performs within this setting as a means of opening other spiritual dimensions as well as other texts and languages.

Marie's *Espurgatoire* is a relatively close translation of a Latin source about the discovery of the opening to purgatory. The *Espurgatoire* was the first in a series of vernacular translations of the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii* (c. 1170–85) by Huntingdon monk 'H.' de Saltrey. The *Espurgatoire*'s composition has conventionally been dated to c. 1190, though Carla Rossi argues convincingly for an earlier date of 1173.¹⁹ Both the *Tractatus* and the *Espurgatoire* are therefore likely to have been composed in the years following the arrival of the first colonisers in Ireland, in 1169. Indeed, the religious and political conquest of Ireland is arguably the subtext of these retellings of the legend.²⁰ The *Espurgatoire* recounts two interconnecting stories: that of St Patrick's discovery of the entrance to purgatory, and that of an Irish knight called Owen, who visits purgatory to atone for past sins. In the first section of the text, Patrick travels to Ireland to preach. Shortly afterwards, God shows the saint the opening to purgatory to assist him in converting the Irish, by providing evidence that Patrick's teachings are true. The geography of this event is important. Translation is integral to the saint's communication with the people he aims to convert in Ireland. Indeed, the first confession described in the text requires the use of a *latimer* (interpreter) to translate for the saint (*Espurgatoire*, ll. 229–34). Later, Owen not only mediates between the known world and the purgatorial otherworld but also acts as a linguistic interpreter for a monk from Cîteaux called Gilbert (*Espurgatoire*, ll. 1951–60). Like the *Lais*, the *Espurgatoire* uses proximate experiences of multilingualism to contextualise a more expansive reflection on translation and narrative composition. Ireland is already a terrain where Christian holy men are confronted with cultural and linguistic differences that must be overcome if their evangelising mission is to succeed; the country is additionally home to a portal to purgatory that poses its own translation challenges, by defying adequate description in any known language. Owen is positioned at the intersection of these encounters with difference: as an Irish knight who interprets for Gilbert, and as a witness who has returned from purgatory and lived to tell the tale.

In the prologue, Marie associates her role as translator with that of Owen. In presenting her translation, she invites readers to see God's

grace as the inspiration for her work and, a little later, focuses on the limitations of her experience of the subject matter. These are characteristics that Marie's endeavours share with Owen's experiences while in purgatory. The account of Owen's purgatorial adventure often highlights the indescribable nature of what he witnesses, as well as the conceptual limits with which the place confronts him (for example, *Espurgatoire*, ll. 1103–10, 1663–6). Like Owen's experience, Marie's encounter with her material ultimately leads her closer to God, even if it cannot be based on perfect understanding (*Espurgatoire*, ll. 9–30). Marie's epilogue briefly returns to issues of translation and comprehension in emphasising the popularising motivation for her text:

Joe, Marie, ai mis en memoire
le livre de l'Espurgatoire,
en romanz, k'il seit entendables
a laie genz e covenables. (*Espurgatoire*, ll. 2297–300)

(I, Marie, have put into memory
the book of purgatory
in the romance language, that it might be understandable
and fitting to laypeople.)

We know from Marie's prologue and dedication, as well as from the way purgatorial experience is represented in the *Espurgatoire*, that the memory and the understanding she mentions in these lines are incomplete. Translation nonetheless offers partial access to the truths which each of these faculties may be used imperfectly to grasp – and thus holds out the promise of spiritual improvement for less educated members of Marie's audience.

Works attributed to Marie bear witness to the historical moment in which they were written in several ways that have a bearing on how we conceptualise their authorship. The forms of composition featured in these texts are connected to the reading or glossing of other works, as well as to practices of translation and adaptation. These texts often locate themselves within a multilingual setting and highlight the role of the female writer-translator within that context. The works identified with Marie are shaped to varying degrees by French, Latin, Breton, English, Arabic, and Irish cultures and languages. Translation suffuses all of these texts as a mode of literary production. It is even actively thematised in some of them. The female writer illuminates the significance of composing in French by reference to other languages, particularly those relevant to Angevin Britain. In the *Lais* and the *Espurgatoire*, this consciousness of the particularity of French translation in an insular setting also goes beyond the framing of the text.

The subtle deployment of translation in these works as a concept as well as a mechanism of textual transmission shows a sophisticated grasp of how the limits of vernacular translation can uncover deeper levels of meaning or understanding for audiences with multilingual awareness.

Even where an explicit focus on interlinguistic translation is less to the fore, the corpus attributed to Marie depicts textual production and translation as collaborative enterprises involving women as well as men. This conception of authorship means that Marie's presentation of herself as the writer responsible for the French work often invites comparison with male and female characters involved in story-making and textual composition within the texts themselves. That comparison is nonetheless modulated differently across this corpus and does not always straightforwardly identify the female writer with female characters. The *Lais*, though occasionally critical of women's speech, offer numerous examples of women's involvement in compositional networks. In this collection Marie's literary activities might be aligned with those of female (as well as male) composers and storytellers. *Ysopë* is more equivocal. In Marie's fables, the misogynist imputations of women's narrative agency suggest a distinction between the aristocratic woman writer and the lower-class women who populate the tales themselves. In the *Espurgatoire*, Marie's role in communicating experiences that defy complete description or comprehension identifies her most notably with Owen, the male intermediary and translator in her text. In all of these works, the writer we have come to identify as 'Marie de France' is positioned within collaborative networks of authorship that pass through translation, as well as oral and written modes of composition. Whoever this Marie was – or these Maries were – the works bearing this name invite us to view them as part of a polyglot textual culture that valued translation, adaptation, and authorship equally. The thematisation of translation and textual production within the works themselves further shows how this could be a source of authority for the female writer, by emphasising her place within medieval textual traditions usually dominated by men and by subtly underscoring her role in perpetuating those traditions.

Notes

1. Marie de France, *Les Fables: Édition critique accompagnée d'une introduction, d'une traduction, de notes et d'un glossaire*, ed. and trans. Charles Brucker (Paris and Louvain: Peeters, 1998). All references to the *Fables*/*Ysopë* are to this edition. In-text references give the number of the fable or section heading, followed by verse number. Translations from French throughout this chapter are my own.

2. Constance Bullock-Davies, 'Marie, Abbess of Shaftesbury, and her Brothers', *English Historical Review* 80 (1965), 314–22. Jessie Crosland, *Medieval French Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), 97. John Charles Fox, 'Mary, Abbess of Shaftesbury', *English Historical Review* 26 (1911), 317–26. Antoinette Knapton, 'A la recherche de Marie de France', *Romance Notes* 19 (1978), 248–53. Ezio Levi, 'Maria di Francia e le abbazie d'Inghilterra', *Archivum Romanicum* 5 (1921), 472–93. Urban T. Holmes, 'New Thoughts on Marie de France', *Studies in Philology* 29 (1932), 1–10. Urban T. Holmes, 'Further on Marie de France', *Symposium* 3 (1949), 335–9. P. N. Flum, 'Additional Thoughts on Marie de France', *Romance Notes* 3 (1961), 53–6. Carla Rossi, *Marie de France et les érudits de Cantorbéry*, *Recherches littéraires médiévales*, 1 (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2009).
3. *La vie Sainte Audrée: poème anglo-normand du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Östen Södergård (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1955). June Hall McCash, 'La vie sainte Audree: A Fourth Text by Marie de France?', *Speculum* 77.3 (2002), 744–77. Logan E. Whalen, *Marie de France and the Poetics of Memory* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 159–73. Rossi, *Marie de France*, 151–201. Rupert T. Pickens, 'Marie de France Translatrix II: La Vie Sainte Audrée', in *A Companion to Marie de France*, ed. Logan E. Whalen (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 267–95. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne with an Appendix by Ian Short, 'Recovery and Loss: Women's Writing Around Marie de France', in *Women Intellectuals and Leaders in the Middle Ages*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, and John Van Engen (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 169–89. For discussion of gender and reception in this text, see also Christiania Whitehead, Chapter 12 in this volume.
4. Wogan-Browne with Ian Short, 'Recovery and Loss', 185–9.
5. An overview of this scholarship can be found in Glyn S. Burgess, *Marie de France: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1977; Supplement No. 1, 1986; Supplement No. 2, 1997).
6. Examples of work in this vein include Susan Crane, 'Anglo-Norman Cultures in England, 1066–1460', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 35–60; Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, 1150–1300: Virginity and Its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–3; Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012); Marianne Fisher, 'Culture, Ethnicity, and Assimilation in Anglo-Norman Britain: The Evidence from Marie de France's *Lais*', *Exemplaria* 24.3 (2012), 195–213; Sahar Amer, *Ésope au féminin. Marie de France et la politique de l'interculturalité*, *Faux titre*, 169 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999); Sif Rikhardsdóttir, *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: The Movement of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).
7. *Marie de France, Lais with introduction and bibliography by Glyn S. Burgess*, ed. Alfred Ewert, 2nd ed. (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995, repr. 2001). In-text references give the title of the *lai* or the prologue in italics, followed by verse numbers.

8. *Marie de France*, Le Purgatoire de saint Patrick accompagné des autres versions françaises en vers et du Tractatus de Purgatorio sancti Patricii de H. de Saltrey, ed. and trans. Myriam White-Le Goff (Paris: Champion, 2019).
9. For discussion of these two works, see Christiania Whitehead, Chapter 12 in this volume.
10. For example, Anne Paupert, 'Les Femmes et la parole dans les *Lais* de Marie de France', in *Amour et merveille: Les 'Lais' de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris: Champion, 1995), 169–87; Robert Sturges, 'Texts and Readers in Marie de France's *Lais*', *Romanic Review* 71 (1980), 244–64; Diana M. Faust, 'Women Narrators in the *Lais* of Marie de France', in *Women in French Literature*, ed. Michel Guggenheim (Saratoga: Anna Libri, 1988), 17–27; Roberta L. Krueger, 'Marie de France', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 172–83; Simon Gaunt, *Retelling the Tale: An Introduction to Medieval French Literature* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 60–69.
11. For example, *Lecheor* and the *Lay of the Beach*. Chrétien's romance *Erec et Enide* also depicts women composing a *lai*. See Amanda Hopkins, 'The "Lay of the Beach" and the Breton Lay Genre', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 54 (2010), 57–72; E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 195–6; Sophie Marnette, 'Gender and Genre in the *Lai du Lecheor*', *Le Cygne* 8 (2021), 29–55.
12. Gaunt, *Retelling the Tale*, 63–6. Robert S. Sturges, *Medieval Interpretation: Models of Reading in Literary Narrative, 1100–1500* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).
13. For more extensive analysis of translation in these texts, see Emma Campbell, *Reinventing Babel in Medieval French: Translation and Untranslatability (c. 1120–c. 1250)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
14. See, for example, Michelle A. Freeman, 'Marie de France's Poetics of Silence: The Implications for a Feminine *Translatio*', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 99.5 (1984), 860–83 (867–71); R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 72–4; R. Howard Bloch, 'The Voice of the Dead Nightingale: Orality in the Tomb of Old French Literature', *Culture and History* 3 (1988), 63–78; Miranda Griffin, 'Gender and Authority in the Medieval French *Lai*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 35 (1999), 42–56 (45–6); Catherine Brown, 'Glossing the Origin: Lost Wax Poesis in the "Lais" of Marie de France', *Romance Philology* 43.1 (1989), 197–208; Sarah Bernthal, 'Dismemberment and Remembrance in the *Lais* of Marie de France', *Pacific Coast Philology* 54.1 (2019), 20–37; Karlheinz Stierle, 'Légendes de l'amour absolu: remembrance et écriture dans les *Lais* de Marie de France', *Zeitschrift für Französische Sprache und Literatur* 121.1 (2011), 66–79 (73–4).
15. What exactly Tristan may have written on the stick has been much discussed. Reviews of the debate include Anna G. Hatcher, 'Lai du *Chievrefueil*', *Romania* 71 (1950), 330–44; Christine Martineau-Génieys, 'Du *Chievrefeuil*, encore et

- toujours', *Le Moyen Âge* 78 (1972), 91–114; Pierre Kunstman, 'Symbole et interprétation: le message de Tristan dans le *Chèvrefeuille*', *Tristania* 13 (1988), 35–52.
16. Amer, *Ésope au féminin*. On sources, see also Marie de France, *Les Fables*, ed. and trans. Brucker, 6–9; Kinoshita and McCracken, *Marie de France*, 42–3; Rossi, *Marie de France*, 75–7.
 17. Karen K. Jambeck, 'The *Fables* of Marie de France: A Mirror of Princes', in *In Quest of Marie de France, A Twelfth-Century Poet*, ed. Chantal A. Maréchal (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 59–106; Charles Brucker, 'The *Fables* of Marie de France and The Mirror of Princes', in *A Companion to Marie de France*, ed. Logan E. Whalen (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 209–35.
 18. Amer, *Ésope au féminin*. Harriet Spiegel, 'The Woman's Voice in the *Fables* of Marie de France', in *In Quest of Marie de France, A Twelfth-Century Poet*, ed. Chantal A. Maréchal (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 45–58.
 19. Arguments for the later date of c. 1190 presume the *Tractatus* was composed between 1185 and 1190; Marie's text must therefore have been written in or after 1190. Rossi argues for an earlier date for both works. She proposes that the *Tractatus* dates to 1173, which also provides a *terminus post quem* for Marie's *Espurgatoire*. De Wilde's unpublished doctoral thesis supports an earlier date for the *Tractatus*; he argues it was composed 1170–5. See Rossi, *Marie de France*, 86–8; Peter de Wilde, 'Le Purgatoire de saint Patrice. Origines et naissance d'un genre littéraire au XIIe siècle, avec une édition de la version en vers anglo-normande du manuscrit British Library, Cotton Domitianus A. IV' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Antwerp, 2000), cited in Keith Busby, *French in Medieval Ireland, Ireland in Medieval French: The Paradox of Two Worlds* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 62, n. 143. On dating, see also Marie de France, *Le Purgatoire de saint Patrick*, ed. and trans. White-Le Goff, 10–11 and 121; Yolande de Pontfarcy, 'Le *Tractatus de purgatorio sancti Patricii* de H. de Saltrey: sa date et ses sources', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 460–80; Marie de France, *L'Espurgatoire seint Patriz*, ed. and trans. Yolande de Pontfarcy (Louvain: Peeters, 1995), 1–10; Lucien Foulet, 'Marie de France et la légende du Purgatoire de Saint Patrice', *Romanische Forschungen*, 22 (1908), 599–627; Robert Easting, 'The Date and Dedication of the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*', *Speculum* 53 (1978), 778–83; Karl Warnke, 'Die Vorlage des *Espurgatoire St. Patriz* der Marie de France', in *Philologische Studien aus dem romanisch-germanischen Kulturkreise: Karl Voretzsch zum 60. Geburtstage und zum Gedenken an seine erste akademische Berufung vor 35 Jahren*, ed. B. Schädel and W. Mulerdt (Halle: Niemeyer, 1927), 135–54.
 20. Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 272; Myriam White-Le Goff, 'Pour une lecture politique de la légende du Purgatoire de saint Patrick', in *Vérité poétique, vérité politique. Mythes, modèles et idéologies politiques au Moyen Âge*, ed. Jean-Christophe Cassard, Élisabeth Gaucher, and Jean Kerhervé (Brest: CRBC, 2007), 435–45; Laura Ashe, *Fiction and History in England, 1066–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 194–204. Busby further connects this to the interest in language and interpreting demonstrated by these texts; Busby, *French in Medieval Ireland*, 69–70.

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