

## Triangles of the Sacred Sisterhood

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In an article entitled “The Structuring of Feminine Empowerment: Gender and Triangular Relationships,” Nora Cottille-Foley discusses how Marie de France sometimes subverts the eternal triangle of husband, wife, and lover and reforms it in order to further the agency and power of the female protagonist.<sup>1</sup> In both the courtly romance and comic *fabliau*, as Cottille-Foley notes, the adulterous triangle of husband, wife, and lover is a prominent theme.<sup>2</sup> The perspectives, of course, are quite different: in courtly works, the main interest focuses on the illicit love relationship of wife and lover, whereas in the *fabliau* the focus is on the conflict of the married couple, their relationship being a source of comedy, derived often from the pairing of a lustful, deceitful wife and a rather dim-witted but domineering husband. In both courtly and comic genres, the triangle is a site of conflict. In courtly works, the resolution is generally in favour of the status quo as a courtly adulterous affair rarely works out, while in the *fabliau* the marriage is generally left intact, although a deceitful wife may be given *carte blanche* to philander. Cottille-Foley suggests that Marie rewrites these fixed and predictable triangles through a series of Derridean slippages to produce new triangles whose composition enhances women’s agency and leads to a new resolution of peace and harmony for the women involved: “the third character acts as an empowering double to the main protagonists. The figure of the patriarch remains only as an archaic trace in the text and is written over by the figure of the female poet, the providential aunt, or the fellow woman.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Cottille-Foley, “The Structuring of Feminine Empowerment,” 153-80.

2 Cottille-Foley, “The Structuring of Feminine Empowerment,” 154-55.

3 Cottille-Foley, “The Structuring of Feminine Empowerment,” 156.

Two of Marie's *lais*<sup>4</sup> on which Cottille-Foley focuses are *Fresne* and *Eliduc*, in which a new triangle of two women and a man is introduced and where Marie embarks on "the rewriting of women's role in [...] sisterhood."<sup>5</sup> In *Fresne*, a young girl is abandoned by her mother and cheated of her inheritance. She is adopted by an abbess and, thanks to this support of a "surrogate" mother/aunt, she is both restored to her birth family (which includes her twin sister) and able to enter into an honourable marriage with her lover, who was on the point of contracting a marriage with the twin. The triangle of the aunt (replaced by the twin sister, Codre, who willingly cedes her place once Fresne is recognized), Fresne and her lover thus operates to bring about a "new" and happy marriage.

*Eliduc* is the *lai* on which the present paper will focus. This *lai* could possibly have the alternative title "Guilideluc and Guilliadun," after the two main female protagonists, as Marie suggests in her prologue. Eliduc, a successful knight married to the Lady Guilideluc, has to flee his land and leave his wife. In a new land, he wins a new reputation and the love of Guilliadun, a king's daughter. The main focus of the narrative is on the encounter and growing relationship of the two women, as Marie herself says:

D'eles deus ad li lai a nun  
 Guildeluëc ha Guilliadun  
 Elidus fu primes nomez,  
 Mes ore est li nuns remuez,  
 Kar des dames est avenuz  
 L'aventure dunt li lais fu.<sup>6</sup>

The two ladies meet when Eliduc takes his young mistress back to his original home where his wife still dwells. On the boat across the sea, Guilliadun first learns that her lover, whom she and her father had presumed single, is, in fact, married. She faints and appears dead. Eliduc puts the body in the chapel of a hermit in a situation rather like that of Snow White when she swallows the apple. Not surprisingly, Eliduc is troubled as his wife lives not far off. Guilideluc worries about her husband and wonders where he goes when he leaves to visit his young mistress lying in the chapel. After spying on her husband, Guilideluc finds the chapel and the girl, for whom she has an immediate affinity. She is filled with pity on seeing the young and lovely maiden, lying there dead. She realizes, too, that it is her husband's love. She calls her servant and shows him the marvel:

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4 In *Milun*, too, a sisterly bond is described when the heroine's sister agrees to bring up her illegitimate nephew, the son of Milun.

5 Cottille-Foley, "The Structuring of Feminine Empowerment," 156.

6 *Eliduc*, in *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. and trans. Alexandre Micha, ll. 21-26. Subsequent references to the works of Marie de France are to this edition.

“Veiz tu, fet ele, cest femme,  
 Ki de beuté resemble gemme?  
 Ceo est l’amie mun seignur  
 Pur quei il meine tel dolur.  
 Par fei, jeo ne me en merveil mie,  
 Quant si bele femme est perie.  
 Tant par pité, tant par amur  
 Jamés n’avrai joie nul jur.”<sup>7</sup>

The story of the two ladies then takes an interesting and unexpected twist. A weasel runs out over the girl’s body, and Guildeluec’s servant immediately kills the little animal, believing it to have sullied the maiden’s pure body. A second weasel, the partner of the first, comes up and, failing to rouse its mate, leaves and returns with a bright red flower which it places in the stricken weasel’s mouth. The latter miraculously comes back to life. Guildeluec reacts at once, instructs her servant to seize the weasel, and snatches the flower. When she places the flower in the girl’s mouth, Guilliadun, too, miraculously revives. Guilliadun then recounts her sad story to Guildeluec, unaware, of course, that she is speaking to the wife of her lover who has tricked her. She finishes by lamenting that Eliduc has betrayed and then abandoned her in a foreign country, adding, “Mut est fole ki humme creit!”<sup>8</sup> At this point, one would imagine that Guildeluec would reveal her own identity and show anger at both Eliduc and Guilliadun. But her reaction is startling. She is sorry for both her husband’s grief and the maiden’s plight. She wants to help them, bring them together. As for herself, she will withdraw to a nunnery and, in so doing, remove all impediment to their lawful union.

But Marie’s story does not end there. The new couple lives out a happy married life, a good life in which they conduct themselves as good Christians, giving alms to the poor. Eliduc and his second wife eventually choose to enter the religious life. He founds and funds his own order, while Guilliadun joins Guildeluec as her sister in God. Guildeluec receives her as her sister, showing her great honour, and teaching her about the order:

El la receut cum sa serur  
 E mut li porta grant honur  
 De Deu servir l’amonesta  
 E sun ordre li enseigna.<sup>9</sup>

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7 *Eliduc*, ll. 1021-28.

8 *Eliduc*, l. 1084.

9 *Eliduc*, ll. 1167-70.

Several scholars in the past have discussed Marie's *Eliduc* in the context of a wide distribution of stories on the theme of a husband who had two wives, from Oriental to Celtic tales and from early societies where bigamy was permitted.<sup>10</sup> The earliest form of the story may have taken the form of an accepted bigamy where a husband has several adventures and finally finds himself married to, or involved with, two ladies, although he may not have planned to be in this kind of situation. In some tales, one lady is simply replaced by another, more favoured lady.<sup>11</sup> Some versions have the second lady convert to Christianity after meeting her husband in a tale set against the backdrop of the Crusades. Once the story enters a Christian context, the ending may be similar to *Eliduc* in that the two ladies eventually avoid bigamy when one or, sometimes, both enter a convent. In these analogues, a very important feature is the functional opposition of the two ladies to the husband, which may lead to a certain common cause or solidarity between them.

There are further interesting facts about *Eliduc*. This *lai* is found last in the only manuscript which contains all twelve (British Library, MS Harley 978). Although there is no guarantee whatsoever that this order is the order of composition, many editions follow it, and some critics have tried to impose certain overall patterns. Selected *lais* are found in other manuscripts in different orders. *Eliduc*, incidentally, is found only in the Harley manuscript. In the *lais*, Marie explores different aspects of love, including courtly love and marriage. Alternatives to legitimate but unhappy unions are sometimes offered. Sometimes they succeed (as in *Guigemar*, *Milun*, and *Fresne*), but sometimes they are rejected or short-lived (as in *Yonec* and *Laüstic*). Heterosexual love, in general, seems to entail mainly suffering. It is just possible that *Eliduc* may represent Marie's culminating use of the *lai* genre and *Eliduc's* advocacy of a sacred sisterhood and love of God, rather than of man; and it may be her last word on the subject of love and marriage.

In Clemence of Barking's *Life of St. Catherine*, St. Catherine of Alexandria is a virgin martyr of the fourth century. She is the orphaned daughter of a king and so runs her own household. She is also a very learned lady who has had a good classical education and who is not afraid to put it to good use. She takes issue with Emperor Maxentius' pagan sacrifices and idolatrous rites, courageously and knowledgeably defending her own Christian convictions. She even wins debates with his best philosophers in

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10 See Paris, "La légende du mari aux deux femmes," 109-30; Matzke, "The Lay of *Eliduc* and the Legend of the Husband with Two Wives," 211-39; and Trindade, "The Man with Two Wives," 466-78.

11 Interestingly, both *Tristan* (especially in the latter part) and Marie's *Fresne* may also be seen as variations on this theme of a man with two ladies/wives one of whom may take the place of, or cede her place to, the other.

defence of Christianity and converts them. Maxentius puts her in a dungeon prison, threatens her with death, and commissions a dreadful execution machine of knife-studded wheels on which to break her. Angels, sent by God, intervene, however, to sabotage the machine. Nonetheless, Catherine will eventually die on Maxentius' orders.

One of the most interesting features of the Catherine legend and one particularly exploited by Clemence is the growing relationship, again one of sisterhood in God, between Catherine and Maxentius' wife. Another triangle of two women and a man is created, that of Maxentius, Catherine and Maxentius' wife. Maxentius wishes to destroy Catherine's faith, but like the villain in many accounts of virgin martyrdom, he lusts after her, too. The possibility of a man having two wives (against an eastern setting) is even raised here. Eventually, he proposes to make her his wife, although he does wish to safeguard his first wife's dowry. For her part, Catherine's only lover is Christ. Maxentius' wife is overcome by Catherine's sentence and by her being flung into the dungeon to await execution. While she is there, Maxentius' wife visits her along with Lord Porphyry, an important dignitary at court. Maxentius' wife is especially moved on hearing that the young girl is beautiful, and she is dismayed that such a lovely girl is being held and also deprived of proper nourishment:

Grant pitié out de la pulcele,  
Car dit li fud que mult ert bele.  
De sa jovente out mult grant tendrur,  
Car ja iert le trezime jur  
Qu'ele en la chartre mise fu,  
E que mangié n'ot ne beu.<sup>12</sup>

Once again a wife is overcome by the fate of a beautiful maiden whom her husband desires, and yet she feels only pity for her. There is also awe, for in the room where Catherine is held there is bright light as well as a sweet smell which invigorates them. All this is sent by God via his angels who tend to the young girl's wounds where she had been beaten. Catherine says that she had been waiting for the Queen and places a crown of fine gold in her hair, telling the Queen that she has been wishing her to become her companion. She bids the Queen take Christ as her lover and to live no longer in fear of the Emperor. Of the latter's love, she says that it is weak and deceptive and that his power is ephemeral: "S'amur est fraille e decevable, / E sa poesté trespassable."<sup>13</sup> Like the maiden

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12 Clemence of Barking, *Life of St. Catherine*, ll. 1507-12.

13 *Life of St. Catherine*, ll. 1643-44.

in *Eliduc*, Catherine admonishes the Emperor's wife not to love her mortal husband, for a man's love is short-lived, and she proceeds, as does Eliduc's wife, to instruct the other woman about a greater lover:

Tels est la poesté humeine,  
 Ci n'ad nule joie certeine.  
 Dame reine, pur ço pri,  
 Ne dutez cest mortel mari.  
 Sa poissance ne deis duter,  
 Ne s'amur guaires desirer.  
 Mais met en lui tut tun desir,  
 Ki dampner te puet e guarir,  
 Ki pur cestes muables peines  
 Nus dunrad les joies certeines.<sup>14</sup>

Catherine continues to describe heaven's joys for the Queen and Porphyry. All is good under God's rule, and with him, as Queen of Heaven, is his mother Mary. The cult of Mary was important to Clemence, and Barking was dedicated to Mary. Not surprisingly, Catherine always stresses the chastity of the women in heaven. There are choirs of virgins who have shunned earthly lovers to devote themselves to God:

Le coer i est des dameiseles,  
 Des virges e des chastes pulceles  
 Ki les mortels amanz despistrent.  
 E la chaste amur Deu eslistrent.<sup>15</sup>

The Queen and Porphyry leave Catherine's dungeon with renewed strength and joy at the knowledge of this greater lover.

The love of God which Catherine offers is in stark contrast to the love between the Queen and Maxentius as Clemence describes it a few scenes later when Maxentius confronts his wife concerning her conversion which he interprets as a betrayal. This particular scene is one of the most striking of the saint's biography and, as has been noticed by various critics,<sup>16</sup> illustrates one of several aspects of Clemence's style which distinguishes her from her Latin sources, namely, her efforts to colour her account with the

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14 *Life of St. Catherine*, ll. 1651-60.

15 *Life of St. Catherine*, ll. 1779-82.

16 See Batt, "Clemence of Barking's Transformations of *Courtoisie*," 102-103; Robertson, "Writing in the Textual Community," 5-28; and MacBain, "Some Religious and Secular Uses of the Vocabulary of *Fin' Amor*," 261-76.

language of the court rather than to recreate the sober, clerical style. In particular, Clemence borrows language and motifs from the Tristan story, especially the courtly version by Thomas of Britain, which would have been the principal new source of inspiration at the time, coming from the court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. This adulterous love story, portrayed as a wonderful and uplifting experience by Thomas, would seem to hold little attraction for Clemence and her ideas of heavenly love. Yet she recalls and interweaves the story of Tristan and Yseut in a stunning way, as Duncan Robertson has pointed out. Maxentius confronts his wife who has abandoned him to join Catherine. Clemence has already built up a picture of this cruel tyrant who now asks his wife, “Coment viveras tu sanz mei, / Et ge coment viverai sanz tei?”<sup>17</sup> These are, of course, the exact sentiments with which Marie de France describes the love of Tristan and Yseut in *Chievrefoil*, which is, incidentally, the penultimate *lai* in the Harley manuscript, immediately preceding *Eliduc*. Marie says that the two lovers are like the honeysuckle and the hazelwood which survive while the honeysuckle is entwined around the hazel, and, if the honeysuckle is removed, the hazel soon dies. So Tristan says of himself and his love, “Bele amie, si est de nus: / Ne vus sanz mei, ne jeo sanz vus.”<sup>18</sup> Here, Maxentius’ twisted line of thinking inverts the beautiful image of the Tristan story as he continues by saying that he has no alternative but to put his wife to death—a cruel death. Duncan Robertson remarks, “I believe she means us to read the passage ironically, as a critical comment on the Tristan romance and on courtly literature in general.”<sup>19</sup> It would seem probable that Clemence is taking a very firm stance concerning the Tristan love story, although at the same time playing into the courtly vocabulary which would have been the currency of the reading of the convent ladies for whom she was writing. All the attraction of Tristan’s love for Yseut falls away when the same sentiments come from the mouth of such a fiend as Maxentius. Clemence eloquently makes her point about the heavenly love advocated by Catherine.

The Queen and Catherine have a final interview before the Queen goes to her death. As she goes to the scaffold, she calls on Catherine to give her support. Indeed, as has been pointed out, the Queen cedes her place to the saint in a manner not unlike that of Guildeluec in *Eliduc*:

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17 *Life of St. Catherine*, ll. 2175-76.

18 *Chievrefoil*, ll. 77-78.

19 Robertson, “Writing in the Textual Community,” 22.

'Ohi, fait ele, real pulcele,  
 Orez pur ceste Deu ancele  
 A tun grant Deu ki tant est boens,  
 Ki par tut est cunfort as suens.<sup>20</sup>

While Catherine acquires royal status, the Queen, going to her death, becomes a simple handmaiden of the Lord. Catherine provides her with the necessary comfort:

Tut est delit ceo qu'illoc ad,  
 Kar duz est li reis qui ['I] maintent.  
 Tut est douz ceo ke illoc vent.  
 De la duçur ke vient de lui  
 Est quanque illoc ad endulci.  
 Nule rien n'i ad vigur  
 De contrester cel douçur.<sup>21</sup>

Playing on the word “sweet” to describe the joys of Christ, the heavenly lover, Clemence’s vocabulary here is from a different source than the *Tristan*. Rather, it is in keeping with such texts as the Song of Songs, also very popular at the time, and which tells of Christ as lover but in the erotic terminology of the mystic.<sup>22</sup> Clemence contrasts *Tristan* and the Song of Songs—the two, in their very different ways, most erotic texts of her time—to emphasize strongly her message to the ladies of her convent concerning the deadly attraction of courtly love in the secular world, on the one hand, and the virtues of a life of chastity and love directed to God, on the other, if one took the alternate route to the convent, as Duncan Robertson points out:

But there is more to this. Clemence’s attitude to “courtly love” is not simply one of moralizing opposition. As a vernacular hagiographer, she looks to Thomas and the romancers, on one side, and to Bernard of Clairvaux, on the other. She celebrates the passion of love, with a lyricism reminiscent of Thomas, but follows Bernard in the redirection of love to its divine source.<sup>23</sup>

Concerning her version of Catherine’s story, Robertson continues, “Both Thomas and Bernard, and their respective literary traditions, inform Clemence’s revisionist treatment of a legend which had previously been read mainly as a call to spiritual arms.”<sup>24</sup>

20 *Life of St. Catherine*, ll. 2263-66.

21 *Life of St. Catherine*, ll. 2290-96.

22 Song of Songs 2:3; 5:13-16.

23 Robertson, “Writing in the Textual Community,” 22.

24 Robertson, “Writing in the Textual Community,” 23.



In the above analysis of the works of Marie de France and Clemence of Barking, a novel triangle of two women and a man is created in which the two women develop warm and supportive feelings for each other. Instead of becoming rivals for the man's affections, they come to make common cause against him. In both cases, secular love, particularly courtly love with its taint of adultery, is ultimately rejected. Clemence directly contrasts the love of Tristan and Yseut with heavenly love, advocating the latter wholeheartedly. Marie may be doing something quite similar in her juxtaposition of *Chievrefoil* and *Eliduc*. The type of love seen in *Tristan* may be beautiful but it cannot last, and there can be no positive outcome in the real world. In *Eliduc*, there is no such impasse, for the ladies finally succeed in moving on to a greater love which they can both share without rivalry. The "sisterly" solidarity in both works leads to a certain empowerment as the two women in both narratives choose for themselves their way in life, that is, to become religious women.

The literary aspirations of both Marie de France and Clemence of Barking may be compared based upon what they say in their prologues. Both feel a solemn obligation to bring to fruition their God-given talent to write. Both feel that present authors should build on the works of previous generations. Both Marie and Clemence are translators, although they take their craft in different directions. While Clemence chooses to produce a new vernacular translation of her Latin source text, Marie considers a translation from Latin but discards the idea. Both, however, choose to embark on a new path. Clemence points out that times have changed and that a previous French translation of the Life of St. Catherine is outdated; she further explains that she is producing a new vernacular version of her source text for the changed times and directed to her convent sisters. Marie decides to work on the lesser-known tradition of the Celts rather than on a translation from Latin because the latter area is already so heavily exploited. One might add that translation from Latin is a strong patriarchal tradition, and Marie is more determined to develop her own individual, even feminine, direction.

Marie de France has never been conclusively identified. Several theories have been put forward, suggesting that she is one or other of several historical figures. One of the popular theories is that she was the illegitimate daughter of Geoffrey Plantagenet, count of Anjou and father of Henry II of England. Her mother may have been a lady of Maine called the Lady of Outillé. There may also have been Welsh connections in the family.<sup>25</sup> This Marie likely frequented the court of her half-brother, Henry II. She also became abbess of Shaftesbury and thus would have had a background of both court and cloister.

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25 Fox, "Marie de France," 303-306, and "Mary, Abbess of Shaftesbury," 317-26.

In *Eliduc*, the story has a curious parallel with the life of another possible candidate likely to be Marie de France. As a lady writing in the third and fourth quarters of the twelfth century, Marie has been identified by some critics as Marie, countess of Boulogne,<sup>26</sup> who became abbess of Romsey Abbey in Hampshire. Marie of Boulogne was born in 1154, the daughter of King Stephen of England (reigning 1135-1154) and of Matilda of Boulogne. Like many royal ladies, including her mother, Marie spent her life partly in the convent and partly in society (at court). Many highborn ladies were put into convents as young girls to await or avoid marriage, or they retired to the convent when a marriage ended (after annulment or widowhood). Marie herself was brought up in the convent and rose to become an abbess. The convent life suited her well, but her quiet life was disrupted when she was removed from Romsey by Henry II who arranged for a marriage in which she was a political pawn. Wishing to maintain power over Boulogne, Henry married Marie to Matthew of Flanders, an ally. The marriage was brief, although it did produce a daughter. Sometime in the 1170s, Marie returned to convent life and her husband took a second wife. Marie of Boulogne was herself involved in political power struggles, possibly taking up the cause of the “young king” against his father Henry II.

A third persuasive theory suggests that Marie de France is Marie de Beaumont de Meulan, one of the nine children of Galeron de Beaumont and Agnes de Montfort, members of a very influential family in the Norman world.<sup>27</sup> This Marie married Hugh of Talbot and so does not seem to have the same convent background as the Abbess of Shaftesbury and Marie of Boulogne, although it must be added that nothing is really known of this lady’s life except for her parents’ and her husband’s names. We do know, however, that her father was a man of letters who may have passed on his love of literature to this daughter. Marie de Meulan has been especially linked to Marie de France’s *St. Patrick’s Purgatory*, in which several abbeys are mentioned as belonging to the domain of members of Marie de Meulan’s family.

In general, Marie is most likely to have been a lady from an aristocratic or royal house which had connections in both England and France and/or Normandy. Such a lady would have travelled between the different francophone worlds. She may have been the daughter or wife of a lord who had territories in several areas. Alternatively, she may have been born into a French or Norman family and then married to an English lord. Another theory—given Marie’s obvious education—would be that she was a nun, moving between

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26 See Knapton, “À la recherche de Marie de France,” 248-53.

27 Pontfarcy, “Si Marie de France était Marie de Meulan,” 353-61.

different houses of her order in England and France and/or Normandy, probably rising in rank with each move. Finally, there could be a compromise scenario. If not Marie de Boulogne herself or the Abbess of Shaftesbury, Marie might have been another lady who spent her life partly in the secular world and partly in the cloister. Interestingly, Howard Bloch mentions another “notorious” situation where two wives of the same husband withdraw to a convent when their marriages are over.<sup>28</sup> The affair between William IX, the first troubadour and grandfather of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and his mistress, Dangereuse, Eleanor’s maternal grandmother, caused William’s second wife, Philippa, to withdraw to Fontevrault Abbey, where she joined his first wife, Ermengarde, who had become abbess of Fontevrault. Although Bloch’s conclusions about *Eliduc*, also negative concerning secular love, are drawn from a different level of reading the text, he does remind us that Marie de France, as a member of the courtly society of France or Norman England, could very likely have been aware of this “historical subtext.” One might further add that this subtext could suggest another clash between courtly or secular love and divine love, even the opposition of William IX and Robert d’Arbrissel, and the possibility of choices for women.

An interesting feature of Clemence’s background could actually link her with Marie de France. Clemence was a nun of Barking Abbey as she herself mentions at the end of the *Life*: “Par nun sui Clemence numee. / De Berkinge sui nunain.”<sup>29</sup> Barking Abbey, close to London in the twelfth century and now incorporated into the city, was an influential establishment and one linked to the royal court from where it received many of its distinguished inhabitants. It was a place of female learning and provided unique opportunities for ladies who were interested in exploring options other than married life and child rearing. It had a succession of famous abbesses who included ladies from the Norman and Angevin royal houses. Matilda, the first wife of Henry I, became abbess, and so did Matilda, wife of King Stephen and mother of Marie de Boulogne, who may have been Marie de France, as suggested above. Matilda of Boulogne was the founder, in 1148, of the church and hospital of St. Catherine in London. Many of the ladies of Barking were involved in literary pursuits while others held administrative positions, and many were temporary or short-term inmates who were awaiting or had just come out of marriage.

Anglo-Norman culture was not a particularly comfortable context for the lives of women, especially those born into the upper classes. Indeed, the post-Conquest period

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<sup>28</sup> Bloch, *Anonymous Marie de France*, 88.

<sup>29</sup> *Life of St. Catherine*, ll. 2690-91.

is generally thought to have produced a general deterioration in women's rights and independence. Although by Marie's time the consensual theory of marriage of Peter Lombard was increasingly gaining support, high ranking women often had little real control over their lives, as they frequently passed from castle and court to convent. Choices were often made for them. Parents or guardians arranged their marriages when they were very young—the latter often purchasing the right to arrange a marriage, generally with a view to profiting from the arrangement.<sup>30</sup> Although a young woman could repudiate an unwanted spouse when she came of age, still many found themselves in the position of the *mal mariée* so often portrayed by Marie de France. Yet there were asylums where women could flee the world (and marriage) either temporarily or permanently and find themselves, too, in a strong community of women like themselves, brought up at court or in the upper classes with certain sophisticated tastes, including that for court literature like the Tristan story. One of these great settings was Barking Abbey, to which both Clemence and Marie may have had connections. It is for ladies such as these that both Marie and Clemence write.

At abbeys like Barking, and also at Romsey and Shaftesbury, women could find shelter, but they could also find more. These royal abbeys could also foster women's talents. Ladies could turn to literature. Speaking of Clemence's life of Catherine and other Anglo-Norman saints' lives, Robertson describes their sophisticated use of the vernacular, which is by no means an inferior vehicle to Latin for the ladies of the cloister:

This is a very high order of "vernacularization." Comparing the Anglo-Norman texts to their immediate Latin predecessors, we find no effort of reduction or simplification for the benefit of the Latin-illiterate. On the contrary, all three Anglo-Norman texts amplify the given material. Translation into the vernacular effectively *raises* the level of discourse and deepens its spiritual import.<sup>31</sup>

Catherine Batt similarly comments,

Certainly, Clemence's work presupposes a high degree of literary awareness, across a range of different kinds of texts, from liturgy to romance, and Anglo-Norman hagiography itself embraces both the secular and religious worlds. To write "en rumanz" may be less a concession to those ignorant of Latin than a conscious choice of literary register.<sup>32</sup>

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30 See Clark and Williams, "After 1066: The Factual Evidence," 149-50; and Walker, "The Marrying of Feudal Wards," 209-24.

31 Robertson, "Writing in the Textual Community," 13.

32 Batt, "Clemence of Barking's Transformations," 115.

The convent ladies could also become very much involved in the management of these great abbeys and their lands. If women could assert a certain independence in their lives, this was the setting. Both Marie and Clemence give evidence of looking after whatever rights women could have. Guildeluec in *Eliduc* not only withdraws to a convent but also receives money from her husband to finance the convent which she herself will run. Clemence allows Catherine to be well educated and to run her palace, and she makes even the fiendish Maxentius mindful of his wife's right to her dowry. Marie and Clemence cater to the courtly tastes of high-born Anglo-Norman ladies, but, at the same time, reinforce a sense of self-esteem and independence not provided by the patriarchal court society. An important aspect of this female fostering is the notion of solidarity in sisterhood.

Returning to the ideas of Cottille-Foley, the triangle of two women and a man in the work of both Marie and Clemence has important implications for women's choices and also for the institution of marriage. The *mal mariée* in Marie's *lais* could sometimes choose a new mate with whom she could share a more positive love. Most of the time, however, her new life is achieved only through great suffering and, in most cases, is not permanent. Still, Marie does allow her women to exercise a certain freedom which they were unlikely to have in real life. In *Eliduc*, she goes further through the solidarity which develops between the two women. A marriage is rearranged with one of the women showing extraordinary generosity and self-sacrifice, but marriage is ultimately rejected altogether for convent life and love of God. In Clemence's *Life*, too, female solidarity grows and a marriage ends when Catherine encourages the Queen to walk away from hers for the love of God. As Batt has pointed out, Clemence uses her female protagonists to convey a strong message in favour of the conventual way of life to her audience:

Clemence is not simply responding to a sentimental taste in describing a virgin martyr in the literary currency of her perhaps mainly aristocratic sisters: rather her translation is recreational in the fullest sense. She transforms the terms of reference of a *courtois* mode so as to make it a mirror of affective piety, and one, moreover that works within an already known nexus of devotional expression and experience.<sup>33</sup>

It is not impossible that Marie may be adopting a similar strategy with courtly literature in her *lais*.

One could, however, go even further to suggest that in both Clemence's and Marie's texts the solidarity of sisterhood and the empowerment it fosters are just as important

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33 Batt, "Clemence of Barking's Transformations," 115.

as the message to love God. Both ladies come from the same female Anglo-Norman aristocratic experience of life played out between court and convent. The reality of their lives would treat both as pawns in a patriarchal society where women were objects of exchange in marriage and political arrangements. In the interior of royal convents like Barking, possibly Romsey and Shaftesbury, too, these upper-class ladies would have had the time to discuss their female condition, read to each other, and bond as sisters in a common cause. Again Robertson has similar views:

At Barking, the cultivation of the vernacular was closely related to the “feminist” mission of the abbey. The nuns were generally less well schooled in Latin than were their male counterparts in the monasteries; but their spiritual needs were entirely comparable and congruent with their aristocratic “mentality.”<sup>34</sup>

A glimpse of this ideology developed by the convent sisterhood is seen in the new arrangement of the eternal triangle in the works of Marie and Clemence where two ladies act together as sisters to obliterate an old patriarchal power block so as to give a rare advantage to the female side. Of course, it is less surprising to find in Clemence a strong advocate of the convent, but comparing her with Marie de France may cast new light on the question of Marie’s own allegiance, suggesting that it may be more pro-convent than pro-court. Marie’s *lais* are seen as the most secular of her compositions, whereas the fables and *St. Patrick’s Purgatory* could easily come from the pen of an abbess. Yet in her *lais*, Marie paints secular love as painful and almost never casts marriage in a positive light. If the order of MS Harley 978 is Marie’s own, she may be following a moral plan throughout the *lais*. If *Eliduc* is indeed placed last by Marie, then it, too, carries a strong message about the positive value of convent life.

Still, both Marie and Clemence represent the court as well as the convent and go between both worlds. Their writing, therefore, in both cases seeks to inform court thinking. As Robertson points out with regard to the ladies of Barking,

It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe to the poem an exclusively feminist or exclusively monastic orientation. The convent has a mission in the world. St. Catherine calls upon women religious to lead the intellectual and spiritual development of the whole community.<sup>35</sup>

Marie de France may well be the Dame Marie whose stories were so popular at court, especially with the ladies, as reported by Denis Piramus.<sup>36</sup> Both Marie and Clemence,

<sup>34</sup> Robertson, “Writing in the Textual Community,” 6-7.

<sup>35</sup> Robertson, “Writing in the Textual Community,” 17.

<sup>36</sup> See Denis Piramus, *La Vie Saint Edmund le Rei*, ll. 37.

then, are brilliant exponents of the Anglo-Norman aristocratic female culture, well read and well versed in the literary ideas of the day at court and well able also to exploit their own feelings in a powerful, sophisticated, and lyrical way in the medium of the newly emerging literary vernacular. Neither may be a great supporter of the popular Tristan story of their day, for ultimately that love is tragic and even sets ladies against each other. It is significant that both take up old stories and give them a very novel twist. As a strong and supportive sisterhood in the convent, Anglo-Norman ladies, nevertheless, remained influential at court due to their spiritual and intellectual gifts and their common cause, despite the social forces which often worked against them and forced many of them into unhappy marriages.

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