POETRY
Introduction

Known only from what she reveals about herself in her writings, Marie de France is a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman author, perhaps the first female French author. She is known for her collection of Lais, twelve short poems that follow a Breton romance style.

Marie de France’s Bisclavret can be read through the lens of disability studies, specifically in the text’s depictions of shape-shifting or lycanthropy, disfigurement, and the psychological issues resulting from domestic abuse. The physical appearance of the first and second are quite clear within the text in the titular character and his wife, respectively, while the third requires more interpretation in terms of the relationship between the two.

Marie de France, as the narrator, gives the reader specific information at the beginning of the text about werewolves:

Garualf, [eo] est beste salvage:  
Tant cum il est en cele rage,  
Hummes devure, grant mal fait,  
Es granz forez converse e vait. (ll. 9–12)²

[The Were-Wolf is a fearsome beast. He lurks within the thick forest, mad and horrible to see. All the evil that he may, he does. He goeth to and fro, about the solitary place, seeking man, in order to devour him.]

We learn later that the titular character is himself one of these figures, although this description is the antithesis of Bisclavret. He is indeed, even in his werewolf form, noble and good, described in the Eugene Mason translation, which is provided in full below, as a “christened man.” The narrator is setting us up, only to play with our preconceptions about werewolves.

Bisclavret’s lycanthropy only becomes disabling once his wife traps him in his wolf form by having his clothes stolen; clothing is both the literal mechanism that allows his transformation and the metaphorical difference between human and beast. The impairing features of his lycanthropy are an initial separation from his previous position in society and an inability to communicate as a human, both of which are resolved by the end of the text. Indeed, in every other way, he acts the same as before, particularly in terms of his demonstration of fealty and behavior towards his king. The king and the people of the court are able to perceive in him the same characteristics that they find in Bisclavret in his human form. In Mason’s translation, the king says that Bisclavret in werewolf form is “a beast who has the sense of man. He abases himself before his foe, and cries for mercy, although he cannot speak.” It is these characteristics that lead them to install the wolf, thereby reinstalling Bisclavret, in the court. At the end of the text, when he returns to his human form, when as Mason notes “the ravening beast may indeed return to human shape,” he also regains “man’s speech.” His wife then is the only character who disables Bisclavret due to his condition.

When reading Bisclavret, the moment the wife decides to turn against her husband, after learning he is a werewolf, is often a point
of confusion and discussion. Are we meant to blame the wife? Given she later finds herself disfigured and tortured for her actions, it seems like a simple question; she is punished for her betrayal of her husband. Nonetheless, as with everything medieval and everything Marie de France, the question is far more complex than it seems.

First, to address the disfigurement, the wife's nose is torn off by Bisclavret:

Le neis li esracha del vis.  
Quei li peüst il faire pis? (ll. 235–36)

[Breaking from his bonds he sprang at the lady's face, and bit the nose from her visage.]

In Judith Shoaf's translation, she provides the commentary in the original text missing from the Mason translation:

He tore her nose right off her face.  
Could anything be worse than this is?

In the original and Shoaf's translation, it is indicated by the question that disfigurement is considered by the narrator as a tragic circumstance. The emphasis does not seem to be on the pain of the physical experience, but rather what it has done to her appearance. Given that women's beauty in romances is often a defining trait, such a reaction is understandable. Mason's translation also does not provide the further commentary about the wife's succeeding daughters; Shoaf, however, does:

Enfanz en ad asés eüz,  
Puis unt esté bien cuneüz  
[E] del semblant e del visage:  
Plusurs [des] femmes del lignage,  
C'est verité, sen nes sunt nees  
E si viveient esnasees. (ll. 309–14)

[She had plenty of children; grown,  
They were, all of them, quite well-known,  
By their looks, their facial assembly:

More than one woman of that family  
Was born without a nose to blow,  
And lived denosed. It's true! It's so!]

With this statement, we find a clear use of the moral model of disability: the mother's actions are represented by the public disability of the children.

And yet the question persists: are we meant to blame the wife? If we consider romances in terms of their role as fantasy fulfillment for noble readers, we might look at the wife’s actions in Bisclavret from another angle, not one of blame or of defense, but of the psychology of abuse. Imagine, for a moment, a woman who grew up in the nobility, a woman who was aware from an early age that she would be married to someone her family selected and approved. Fortunately for her, she married, according to Mason, “a stout knight,” who is “comely.” Their relationship builds to what they both believe is love, and all is well—with one exception, that he disappears periodically.

When the wife confronts him, her phrasing is that of fear:

Mes jeo creim tant vosotre curuz,  
Que nule rien tant ne redut. (ll. 35–36)

[Right willingly would I receive this gift,  
but I fear to anger you in the asking. It is better for me to have an empty hand, than to gain hard words.]

She fears his anger. We have no indication of why. This phrasing could be dismissed as courteous language between husband and wife, that she does not desire to anger him with her questioning. But what if we look at it from the perspective of a wife who knows very little about her husband although she has to this point been comforted that he does not seem to possess the qualities she feared in a husband? Could her statement indicate the lingering fear of how her husband will treat her? Has she heard stories of men who were kind to their wives until a moment
when they seemed to turn against them? We certainly have examples in romances of abusive knights—for instance, Erec in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Erec and Enide*, the knight-rapist in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, and, elsewhere in Marie de France’s *Lais*, the lord in Yonec.

When Bisclavret assures her with physical caresses that he will answer her questions, she replies:

Par fei, fet ele, ore sui guarie!
Sire, jeo sui en tel effrei
Les jurs quant vus partez de mei,
E de vus perdre tel poir,
Si jeo n’en ai hastif cunfort,
Bien tost en puis aver la mort. (ll. 42–48)

[“By my faith,” said the lady, “soon shall I be whole. Husband, right long and wearisome are the days that you spend away from your home. I rise from my bed in the morning, sick at heart, I know not why. So fearful am I, lest you do aught to your loss, that I may not find any comfort. Very quickly shall I die for reason of my dread.”]

This response is phrased in the language of illness. His treatment of her, his seeming tender care, makes her “whole.” She talks about living in terror, about fearing to lose him. She indicates she will die from what she is experiencing, that she is “sick at heart,” which is at odds with her desire to be “whole.” On one hand, this certainly could be hyperbole and her attempt to push him into telling about his disappearances, even using the language of illness to elicit guilt on his part. On the other hand, if we read it in the same context as the previous statement, other implications arise. Perhaps her fears have indeed reasserted themselves, to the point that she feels desperately insecure. She has read his disappearances into her fears and cannot “recover” until she knows the truth.

What follows is back and forth between the couple, the wife pressing and Bisclavret denying to answer her questions. Often, this scene is perceived as nagging on the wife’s part, an insatiable need to know, even though Bisclavret is blameless, but what if this fear of abuse is driving her? Finally, he relents and tells her about his shape-shifting. This revelation is certainly not what the wife expected, but it comes on top of a period of renewed psychological—if imagined—trauma related to her pre-marital fears of the kind of man she would wed. And then comes her reaction:

La dame oï cele merveille,
De poir fu tute vermeille;
De l’aventure se esfrea.
El[n] maint endreit se purpensa
Cum ele s’en puïst partir;
Ne voleit mes lez lui gisir. (ll. 97–102)

[On hearing this marvel the lady became sanguine of visage, because of her exceeding fear. She dared no longer to lie at his side, and turned over in her mind, this way and that, how best she could get her from him.]

Her fear starts to multiply. She dwells upon it.

In addition, she likely is aware of the information about werewolves Marie de France gave us at the beginning of the text, that they are subject to rage, acting like savage beasts. If this is a metaphor for evil men, it’s certainly an even better one for abusers who present well until, as Mason states, “the fury is on them.” Edward J. Gallagher translates this passage as, “A werewolf is a ferocious beast which, when possessed by this madness, devours men, causes great damage, and dwells in vast forests.” Gallagher’s translation of “cele rage” as “by this madness” trades on the idea of rage and anger as a mental illness, especially a type of temporary insanity. If we follow this metaphor, the wife may not fear her husband simply as a werewolf, but her husband in a rage, which she has already stated scares her more than anything. Given this interpretation, her actions may indicate the trauma of prolonged fear.
In Bisclavret, Marie de France presents disability from a variety of angles. She explores the ramifications of a werewolf who lacks the negative qualities of his kind, thereby representing what might be a disability—in this case, lycanthropy—as disabling only to those who perceive and treat it so—here, to the character’s wife, but not to his king. She then demonstrates how those who disable others are themselves disabled—the wife, who disabled her husband, is herself disfigured. At the same time, Marie does not depict the disabling character with simplistic motivations; rather, she introduces questions about fear and imagined trauma. The issues of disability in this text are complex and intertwined.

Bibliography

Amongst the tales I tell you once again, I
would not forget the Lay of the Were-Wolf.
Such beasts as he are known in every land.
Bisclavaret he is named in Brittany; whilst
the Norman calls him Garwal.

It is a certain thing, and within the knowl-
dge of all, that many a christened man has
suffered this change, and ran wild in woods,
as a Were-Wolf. The Were-Wolf is a fearsome
beast. He lurks within the thick forest, mad
and horrible to see. All the evil that he may,
he does. He goeth to and fro, about the soli-
tary place, seeking man, in order to devour
him. Hearken, now, to the adventure of the
Were-Wolf, that I have to tell.

In Brittany there dwelt a baron who was
marvellously esteemed of all his fellows. He
was a stout knight, and a comely, and a man
of office and repute. Right private was he to
the mind of his lord, and dear to the coun-
sel of his neighbours. This baron was wedded
to a very worthy dame, right fair to see, and
sweet of semblance. All his love was set on
her, and all her love was given again to him.
One only grief had this lady. For three whole
days in every week her lord was absent from
her side. She knew not where he went, nor
on what errand. Neither did any of his house
know the business which called him forth.

On a day when this lord was come again
to his house, altogether joyous and content,
the lady took him to task, right sweetly, in
this fashion, “Husband,” said she, “and fair,
sweet friend, I have a certain thing to pray
of you. Right willingly would I receive this
gift, but I fear to anger you in the asking. It is
better for me to have an empty hand, than to
gain hard words.”

When the lord heard this matter, he took
the lady in his arms, very tenderly, and kissed
her.

“Wife,” he answered, “ask what you will.
What would you have, for it is yours already?”

“By my faith,” said the lady, “soon shall I be
whole. Husband, right long and wearisome
are the days that you spend away from your
home. I rise from my bed in the morning,
sick at heart, I know not why. So fearful am
I, lest you do aught to your loss, that I may
not find any comfort. Very quickly shall I die
for reason of my dread. Tell me now, where
you go, and on what business! How may the
knowledge of one who loves so closely, bring
you to harm?”

“Wife,” made answer the lord, “nothing
but evil can come if I tell you this secret. For
the mercy of God do not require it of me. If
you but knew, you would withdraw yourself
from my love, and I should be lost indeed.”

When the lady heard this, she was per-
suaded that her baron sought to put her by
with jesting words. Therefore she prayed and
required him the more urgently, with tender
looks and speech, till he was overborne, and
told her all the story, hiding naught.

“Wife, I become Bisclavaret. I enter in the
forest, and live on prey and roots, within the
thickest of the wood.”

After she had learned his secret, she
prayed and entreated the more as to whether
he ran in his raiment, or went spoiled of ves-
ture.

“Wife,” said he, “I go naked as a beast.”

“Tell me, for hope of grace, what you do
with your clothing?”

“Fair wife, that will I never. If I should
lose my raiment, or even be marked as I quit
my vesture, then a Were-Wolf I must go for
all the days of my life. Never again should I
become man, save in that hour my clothing
were given back to me. For this reason never
will I show my lair.”

“Husband,” replied the lady to him, “I love
you better than all the world. The less cause
have you for doubting my faith, or hiding any
tittle from me. What savour is here of friend-
ship? How have I made forfeit of your love;
for what sin do you mistrust my honour?
Open now your heart, and tell what is good
to be known.”

So at the end, outwearied and overborne
by her importunity, he could no longer re-
frain, but told her all.

“Wife,” said he, “within this wood, a little
from the path, there is a hidden way, and at
the end thereof an ancient chapel, where of-
tentimes I have bewailed my lot. Near by is a great hollow stone, concealed by a bush, and there is the secret place where I hide my raiment, till I would return to my own home."

On hearing this marvel the lady became sanguine of visage, because of her exceeding fear. She dared no longer to lie at his side, and turned over in her mind, this way and that, how best she could get her from him. Now there was a certain knight of those parts, who, for a great while, had sought and required this lady for her love. This knight had spent long years in her service, but little enough had he got thereby, not even fair words, or a promise. To him the dame wrote a letter, and meeting, made her purpose plain.

"Fair friend," said she, "be happy. That which you have coveted so long a time, I will grant without delay. Never again will I deny your suit. My heart, and all I have to give, are yours, so take me now as love and dame."

Right sweetly the knight thanked her for her grace, and pledged her faith and fealty. When she had confirmed him by an oath, then she told him all this business of her lord—why he went, and what he became, and of his ravening within the wood. So she showed him of the chapel, and of the hollow stone, and of how to spoil the Were-Wolf of his vesture. Thus, by the kiss of his wife, was Bisclavaret betrayed. Often enough had he ravished his prey in desolate places, but from this journey he never returned. His kinsfolk and acquaintance came together to ask of his tidings, when this absence was noised abroad. Many a man, on many a day, searched the woodland, but none might find him, nor learn where Bisclavaret was gone.

The lady was wedded to the knight who had cherished her for so long a space. More than a year had passed since Bisclavaret disappeared. Then it chanced that the King would hunt in that self-same wood where the Were-Wolf lurked. When the hounds were unleashed they ran this way and that, and swiftly came upon his scent. At the view the huntsman winded on his horn, and the whole pack were at his heels. They followed him from morn to eve, till he was torn and bleeding, and was all adread lest they should pull him down. Now the King was very close to the quarry, and when Bisclavaret looked upon his master, he ran to him for pity and for grace. He took the stirrup within his paws, and fawned upon the prince's foot. The King was very fearful at this sight, but presently he called his courtiers to his aid.

"Lords," cried he, "hasten hither, and see this marvellous thing. Here is a beast who has the sense of man. He abases himself before his foe, and cries for mercy, although he cannot speak. Beat off the hounds, and let no man do him harm. We will hunt no more today, but return to our own place, with the wonderful quarry we have taken."

The King turned him about, and rode to his hall, Bisclavaret following at his side. Very near to his master the Were-Wolf went, like any dog, and had no care to seek again the wood. When the King had brought him safely to his own castle, he rejoiced greatly, for the beast was fair and strong, no mightier had any man seen. Much pride had the King in his marvellous beast. He held him so dear, that he bade all those who wished for his love, to cross the Wolf in naught, neither to strike him with a rod, but ever to see that he was richly fed and kennelled warm. This commandment the Court observed willingly. So all the day the Wolf sported with the lords, and at night he lay within the chamber of the King. There was not a man who did not make much of the beast, so frank was he and debonair. None had reason to do him wrong, for ever was he about his master, and for his part did evil to none. Every day were these two companions together, and all perceived that the King loved him as his friend.

Hearken now to that which chanced.

The King held a high Court, and bade his great vassals and barons, and all the lords of his venery to the feast. Never was there a goodlier feast, nor one set forth with sweeter show and pomp. Amongst those who were bidden, came that same knight who had the wife of Bisclavaret for dame. He came to the
castle, richly gowned, with a fair company, but little he deemed whom he would find so near. Bisclavaret marked his foe the moment he stood within the hall. He ran towards him, and seized him with his fangs, in the King's very presence, and to the view of all. Doubtless he would have done him much mischief; had not the King called and chidden him, and threatened him with a rod. Once, and twice, again, the Wolf set upon the knight in the very light of day. All men marvelled at his malice, for sweet and serviceable was the beast, and to that hour had shown hatred of none. With one consent the household deemed that this deed was done with full reason, and that the Wolf had suffered at the knight's hand some bitter wrong. Right wary of his foe was the knight until the feast had ended, and all the barons had taken farewell of their lord, and departed, each to his own house. With these, amongst the very first, went that lord whom Bisclavaret so fiercely had assailed. Small was the wonder that he was glad to go.

No long while after this adventure it came to pass that the courteous King would hunt in that forest where Bisclavaret was found. With the prince came his wolf, and a fair company. Now at nightfall the King abode within a certain lodge of that country, and this was known of that dame who before was the wife of Bisclavaret. In the morning the lady clothed her in her most dainty apparel, and hastened to the lodge, since she desired to speak with the King, and to offer him a rich present. When the lady entered in the chamber, neither man nor leash might restrain the fury of the Wolf. He became as a mad dog in his hatred and malice. Breaking from his bonds he sprang at the lady's face, and bit the nose from her visage. From every side men ran to the succour of the dame. They beat off the wolf from his prey, and for a little would have cut him in pieces with their swords. But a certain wise counsellor said to the King,

“Sire, hearken now to me. This beast is always with you, and there is not one of us all who has not known him for long. He goes in and out amongst us, nor has molested any man, neither done wrong or felony to any, save only to this dame, one only time as we have seen. He has done evil to this lady, and to that knight, who is now the husband of the dame. Sire, she was once the wife of that lord who was so close and private to your heart, but who went, and none might find where he had gone. Now, therefore, put the dame in a sure place, and question her straitly, so that she may tell—if perchance she knows thereof—for what reason this Beast holds her in such mortal hate. For many a strange deed has chanced, as well we know, in this marvelous land of Brittany.”

The King listened to these words, and deemed the counsel good. He laid hands upon the knight, and put the dame in surety in another place. He caused them to be questioned right straitly, so that their torment was very grievous. At the end, partly because of her distress, and partly by reason of her exceeding fear, the lady's lips were loosed, and she told her tale. She showed them of the betrayal of her lord, and how his raiment was stolen from the hollow stone. Since then she knew not where he went, nor what had befallen him, for he had never come again to his own land. Only, in her heart, well she deemed and was persuaded, that Bisclavaret was he.

Straightway the King demanded the vesture of his baron, whether this were to the wish of the lady, or whether it were against her wish. When the raiment was brought him, he caused it to be spread before Bisclavaret, but the Wolf made as though he had not seen. Then that cunning and crafty counsellor took the King apart, that he might give him a fresh rede.

“Sire,” said he, “you do not wisely, nor well, to set this raiment before Bisclavaret, in the sight of all. In shame and much tribulation must he lay aside the beast, and again become man. Carry your wolf within your most secret chamber, and put his vesture therein. Then close the door upon him, and leave him alone for a space. So we shall see
presently whether the ravening beast may indeed return to human shape.”

The King carried the Wolf to his chamber, and shut the doors upon him fast. He delayed for a brief while, and taking two lords of his fellowship with him, came again to the room. Entering therein, all three, softly together, they found the knight sleeping in the King’s bed, like a little child. The King ran swiftly to the bed and taking his friend in his arms, embraced and kissed him fondly, above a hundred times. When man’s speech returned once more, he told him of his adventure. Then the King restored to his friend the fief that was stolen from him, and gave such rich gifts, moreover, as I cannot tell. As for the wife who had betrayed Bisclavaret, he bade her avoid his country, and chased her from the realm. So she went forth, she and her second lord together, to seek a more abiding city, and were no more seen.

The adventure that you have heard is no vain fable. Verily and indeed it chanced as I have said. The Lay of the Were-Wolf, truly, was written that it should ever be borne in mind.
Endnotes

1 The text is taken from French Medieval Romances: From the Lays of Marie de France, translated by Eugene Mason, 2011 as found in The Project Gutenberg. This text is in the public domain.

