

World History Commons - Analyzing Literary Sources Full Transcript

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1) What are lais? (2:08)

The source I've selected is a collection of what are called lais, which are short, poetic romances. This is part of a genre that emerges in the Middle Ages in the late 11th, early 12th century, as part of the culture of courts and romances. Lais are on the subject usually of love, chivalry, most of those things you associate with the Middle Ages often have a supernatural element, like swans that go back and forth taking notes to people and ships that emerge out of nowhere to take characters off to other places.

These lais are "popular" stories in this courtly culture, "popular" in that the courts were centers of noble culture. Considering that these stories were recited, performed, repeated, and spread throughout Western Europe in many different vernacular languages, we know that they're a good source for at least this nobility—its values, its issues, the customs of this social group—which although elite, was also extremely important in the Middle Ages since they held power.

In the late 12th century, there really isn't a distinction between public and private. You see across the central and into the later Middle Ages, a process that we often call the institutionalization or bureaucratization of government, where royal power is exercised more through institutions than through personal, feudal ties, is really just accelerating.

In the late 12th century, Henry II is one of the key figures in this process, especially in the development of a judicial system and the development of a core of officials. That process of distinguishing the royal household from something that we might recognize as a government is just beginning, so the court is both public and private. It's where power is exercised, but it's also where family and friends cultivate friendship.

2) Were there many female writers in the Middle Ages? (3:27)

This group of stories was written by a woman, Marie de France. She lived in the late 12th century. She actually identifies herself in several of her works, that her name is Marie and that she's from France. There's been a great deal of speculation about who exactly she was. It seems most likely that she was somehow associated with the court of King Henry II of England and his

queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Some have speculated that she was actually an illegitimate half-sister of King Henry II, so she's definitely a member of court and courtly nobility.

She knows this community and society very well and there's the possibility that she was from the most elite strata. She's a very well educated woman. We know that in some of her other works, she translated Latin Aesopic fables into the vernacular, into Anglo-Norman French. It's the Anglo-Norman version of French that was dominant in England after the Conquest and in northern France that these *lais* are written in.

If you look at the whole population of the Middle Ages, it's only a very slender elite that can read and write. Mostly that elite is clerics, but if you look at non-clerics they would all be nobles. And women are more likely to be literate than men until about the 13th and 14th century when there's a spread of male literacy. And this is mainly because elite women were responsible for the education, particularly the religious instruction, of their children. Therefore they have at least some functional literacy.

The emergence of a public sphere is one that's very important to women's status in history and you can see very clearly even elite women losing power as their mode of influence within the court is increasingly circumvented. Officials and more bureaucratic institutions get power and personal influence is less the dominant means of exercising power. Increasingly the education of heirs is given over to professionals, to tutors, and a whole coterie of officials.

They would still have control over daughters and their education, but that's more to prepare them to be married off as political pawns. The more direct influence that they exercised over those who would wield power is definitely diminished across the central Middle Ages. These stories, even though they're highly amusing, actually give you insight into this changing political situation and how it affects women. As well as insight into a whole range of cultural issues.

Still it is exceptional for a woman to have the degree of literacy, and to actually promote herself as an author as Marie de France did. She's clearly very confident of her writing and is interested in taking credit for it.

And we have some evidence of resistance to that. There's actually a contemporary English monk, Denis Pyramus who mentions this "dame Marie" who writes stories and how they're very popular, that many men and women like them, but particularly women. He makes a point of saying that they're untrue. But of course they're meant to be entertaining stories and often have this element of the supernatural or the magical.

3) How do the *lais* inform us about women in this period? (2:16)

One of the reasons that I teach this source is the role of women. Not only the fact that it's written by a woman, but that women are key figures in these stories. Do you get evidence that there's a sort of female perspective here? How are women portrayed? Are they all good? Are they all bad? Do we have good and bad women? If so, what sorts of behaviors in women are praised or castigated and what sorts of roles for women do these stories suggest? Particularly for elite women since at this point we know that in many ways they're losing power as these courts become more institutionalized and power is more centralized in male-dominated institutions.

So many of these women seek out their own lovers and clearly have their desires fulfilled. That shows that this must be a woman writing this because most of their relationships are adulterous. Men who have an interest in producing legitimate heirs to inherit their property, why would they be writing a story which suggests that adultery is a good thing or the way to achieve love?

But then you can point out some of these negative characteristics of women. If these stories are written by a woman, why do you have all of these strongly negative depictions of women—women as scheming, women as duplicitous, women who are unfaithful to their husbands? But I think it's a really open question and it gets students to think about our own notions of what's typical for women. What is a woman's perspective? Is there one woman's perspective? Does the fact that you have positive and negative portrayals of women in these stories really tell us anything about gender?

Another reason to focus on them is if you look at the sources for women's history in the Middle Ages. Those sources in particular that are written by women, they're some of the most accessible and frankly entertaining. So, for purposes of introducing concerns and issues of women in the Middle Ages, I find that these very amusing stories work a lot better than some of the other texts by women which tend to be of a very religious nature.

4) What have scholars learned about women in this period by reading *lais*? (3:50)

There's a very interesting secondary literature by particularly feminist historians about courtly love. Was it a good thing for women? Is it a positive view of women or is it perhaps a new form of misogyny? This is a question that has been raised in the scholarship and it's an interesting issue to try to teach students about historiography and historiographical change.

When women historians first began studying these courtly stories, they found some of the images of the women in these very attractive. These women are choosing their own lovers and they are

making men pursue them. And they are being pursued. And they are getting what they want. They are very active. They have a lot of agency and so the early feminist interpretations of courtly love tended to be very optimistic. That these positive and powerful images of noble women reflected the social and economic conditions, say, for example, in France and England in this period. That women's condition was improving. That they had more opportunities and that this new, more active depictions of women reflected that in some way.

Unfortunately, when social and economic historians got into the documents and really explored the status of women, what they found was pretty grim. Women across this period were very definitely losing access to real property. Noble families were increasingly practicing, primogeniture—giving all of the land to one male heir—whereas previously they had practiced partible inheritance so that all children inherited something, including women. Slowly but surely, women, they're losing access to land and to other forms of wealth, so in fact they're losing power over this period. So how do we explain these images of them?

Then there was another attempt to keep the positive interpretation. Feminist historians saw these as resistance. They may be losing real access to power and wealth, but here they are in a cultural mode exerting more active and positive images of themselves. There's been a lot of work on patronage, the fact that elite women did control the household of courts, at least in the 11th and 12th centuries. Again, that begins to diminish. By controlling the purse strings, they could actually give money to troubadours and other entertainers to make up stories that were pleasing to them and so influence the stories that people heard at court. Maybe these images that they patronized of women in active roles, women having their desires fulfilled, was at least some form of creative resistance against their deteriorating social and economic status.

However, that even relatively optimistic interpretation has given way recently to even darker interpretations of the image of women in these stories. Many feminist scholars have come to doubt that these images of women are really good at all. The conclusion these scholars reached is that the images of women in these stories contribute to the objectification of women. And they come up with a secular version of the old dichotomous view of women that you have in Christianity in that she's either Eve or she's the Blessed Virgin Mary. In these stories women are either really wicked and evil or they're on a pedestal, and that either of these positions is not good for women.

5) How do you introduce lais to students? (2:20)

One set of questions I ask students to look at in these stories are who are the heroes. Who are the

good guys and who are the bad guys. And I ask them to look at how are kings portrayed because kings are the big winners in political power over the central Middle Ages. Monarchs go from being relatively weak in the 10th century in the wake of a whole series of invasions which shatter the political order of western Europe. These are invasions by the Vikings, the Magyars. There's some invasions also from the south from the Islamic kingdoms of North Africa and on the Iberian peninsula. And these invasions have an immensely disruptive impact on Western Europe.

The kings see their power eroded because they can't provide effective defense for their people and so power tends to devolve to local lords who can provide some sort of defense. And these lords live in castles. And when the invasions are over, they immediately start fighting with one another for dominance. And the challenge to kings across the central Middle Ages is to get control of these lords and to extend their authority throughout their kingdom.

Monarchs are successful at getting control of the nobility and extending their power particularly over the 12th and the 13th centuries. But interestingly enough, in these stories, kings don't look very good. They're definitely mistreating their vassals and in fact the heroes of these stories are vassals of the kings, that's the social origins of this literature. This class of regional lords is really the driving force behind creating this very interesting new courtly culture.

These stories were clearly a way for people to debate what is appropriate vassal behavior, what is appropriate kingly behavior. How should kings act? Similarly, what's the appropriate behavior of a vassal and what are the political implications of that behavior? If the king is bad, do you try to overthrow him? Is that what's being recommended to vassals? What kinds of behaviors are being proffered as the appropriate and praiseworthy, noble, chivalrous way to act? How does that affect this project of the increasingly powerful monarchy? Does it contribute to it? Does it frustrate it? Does it suggest an alternative political form?

6) What is the story of Le Fresne? (3:40)

This is called Le Fresne which is a story about twins separated at birth and they end up separated because of a woman's bad behavior.

She takes one of the girls and gives it to a servant woman who takes the child and leaves it near a monastery with marks of a piece of brocade and a golden ring. She's found by a servant of the monastery and raised by the abbess in this convent. When she's coming of age, news of her beauty begins to spread and this knight, Gurun, hears of her beauty and falls in love with her before he's even met her. He actually gives gifts to the monastery, hoping to appear pious but actually to get access to this young woman who's called Le Fresne which means the ash tree

because she was left in a tree to be discovered. She takes Gurun as her lover and, ultimately, goes to his castle and is living as his partner. The couple seems very happy until this knight's vassals castigate him for not taking a wife.

A vassal is a person who has become, in the language of medieval documents, "the man of another man." He is willing to serve another man of higher status who is his lord. Usually this relationship of dependence is given a certain mutual character by the lord giving his vassal a piece of land or fief in return for the loyalty, faithfulness, and military service. Most of these stories turn on the nature of this relationship and this bond and what are the appropriate behaviors on each side, particularly the loyalties that one owes.

This passage is this key turning point in the story where her knight, her lover, is confronted by his vassals and with this choice that he needs to make. It does reveal something about power, but also about this woman's response. How should you respond when all of a sudden your lover decides to do something alarming?

After she, Le Fresne, had been with Gurun for some time, the landed knights reproached him for it severely, and they often spoke to him saying that he should take a noble wife and free himself of Le Fresne. They would be happier if he had an heir to inherit his land and it would be a grievous loss if he did not have a child by a wife on account of his concubine. They would never more consider him their lord, nor serve him willingly, if he did not do their bidding.

The knight agreed to take a wife on their advice and so they looked to see where one might be found. "Lord," they said, "close to us here is a worthy man quite your equal who has a daughter as his heir: much land will come with her. The damsel is called La Codre and in all the land there is none so fair. In exchange for Le Fresne, whom you will give up, you will have La Codre. On the hazel there are nuts to be enjoyed, but the ash never bears fruit. We shall seek to obtain the damsel, and if it please God, we shall give her to you."

Thus they sought this marriage and assent was given by all parties. Alas! What a misfortune that the worthy men did not know the story of these damsels who were in fact twin sisters! Le Fresne was kept hidden from the other girl, who was then married to Le Fresne's beloved. When she learned of the marriage, Le Fresne showed no displeasure but served her lord properly and honoured all his people. The knights of his household, the squires and the serving-boys, grieved much because they were going to lose her.

7) How do you help students analyze Le Fresne? (2:31)

I ask them first think about all the parties involved, like who are these knights? Why are they so interested in whether the lord is married or not? Why do they care if he has an heir?

It matters because they're concerned about stability. They want to begin to develop a relationship with the heir themselves to safeguard their own position. In this passage, there's clearly a distinction between the attitude of the landed knights and their attitudes towards Le Fresne, this young woman, and the knights of his household who are mentioned at the end, the squires and the serving-boys. This brings up a really interesting and important distinction between the knights who had fiefs, who have a real stake in this relationship with their lord and who are wealthy and more powerful by virtue of having land. And then landless knights who are hanging out at the court of this lord and giving him household service, military service in the hopes of being granted a fief so that they become landed knights. Their interests are clearly different from the landed knights.

And then ask the students to think about the behavior of Le Fresne. Why does she act like this? Why does she accept it? I mean, here she has run off with this man, left the only home that she's ever known, to become his partner and to serve him. Suddenly she's just going to be cast aside and in fact be in the position of having to serve his new wife. Would you respond this way? Why does the author, who's a woman, recommend this behavior or portray it as positive? Why does Marie de France portray Le Fresne simply accepting this and continuing to be the meek and well-behaved servant of her lord?

If this were a true story set in the Middle Ages does this woman have a possibility of resistance? What's going to happen to her if she doesn't accept this situation? And in fact, the story very much rewards her behavior because she continues serving him. The truth comes out of her noble status and the fact that she's the twin of the woman that he's just married. And then in fact the marriage is undone and she's married to her lover. So accepting and sort of cooperative behavior is rewarded, whereas women in some of the other stories who take different approaches to get the lover they want, or to keep a lover that they have, do not fare so well in these stories.

8) How do *lais* fit into a larger historical context? (2:32)

These *lais* were distributed via manuscripts. We know that people would read them aloud to usually another group of people assembled at court. Most of this literature also passed orally and in fact, it's believed that Marie and others who were writing these poems were drawing upon a kind of oral stock of stories. In fact, she tells you that she's drawing upon Breton *lais*, and that

she's retelling these stories.

Reading the manuscript would be very different than reading this version. The manuscripts all are in the poetic form that they were written in. These are octosyllabic couplets. There's eight syllables in each line so they have a rhythm and if you're reading it out loud it would have a very steady rhythm.

The reproductions of and the images from manuscripts are written in nice ink on nice parchment and the page is laid out nicely with a lot of margin, which is a sign of wealth since parchment is expensive.

Putting these stories in context is easy, which is one of the reasons that they're so valuable to work with both in terms of scholarship and in teaching. We have multiple renditions of these stories and many of them can be firmly affixed in terms of authorship. We have lots of stories that were romantic stories about similar subject matter like King Arthur and Queen Guinevere and his court written by men. The number that we think are written by women are fewer, but you can compare different versions of the stories and say, "what's a happy ending in a love story in a male author like Chrétien de Troyes?" You can raise the same questions and put similar stories side by side. The matches may not be exact, but they're within the same chronological period and they're within the same cultural milieu and they're within the same literary genre.

You can also contextualize these stories in relation to the changing political circumstances and kinds of historical sources about women say, sources about Eleanor of Aquitaine and her career. Is she typical or not? She's the type of woman that would've been listening to the stories. She was so heavily involved in the politics of the late 12th century. She was married to two different kings, the most powerful men in western Europe. How did the opportunities that she had compare to the opportunities generally that women had? What does this tell us about changing political circumstances?