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Bisclavret: A Cautionary Tale in Selfish Love

In the lays of Marie de France, she tells of many varying romances: stories of forbidden love, of knights coming to save their maidens locked away in castles, of affairs gone awry. Of the prevailing themes throughout the different lays, one of the most ubiquitous is that of selfless versus selfish love — that is, love for another person purely out of adoration and respect for the other person as opposed to love for one's own self-gain. In the lay *Bisclavret*, a knight is condemned to a life of misery after he tells his wife that he becomes a werewolf and she leaves and betrays him by taking his clothes and keeping him in wolf form. She decides to give herself up to a knight she never loved. The story follows a revenge arc as the wolf stumbles across his wife again after coming under a king's protection. Through the contrasting lives and fates of the knight and his wife in *Bisclavret*, Marie de France emphasizes the importance of selfless over selfish love.

The knight's story in *Bisclavret* embodies selfless love. In the lay, the knight, knowing of his affliction, decides to hide it from her because “great harm will come to [him], for as a result [of telling her he] shall lose [her] love and destroy [himself]” (69). The knight, because of his love and affection for his wife, does not wish to explain a condition that could very well scare her away. He exhibits compassion and does not want to frighten her and rupture a loving relationship. His love is expressed through his long trips away so that he can deal with his affliction on his own and his desire to love her and not lose her is expressed through his belief

that he will be destroyed if he scares her away. The knight's selflessness and loyalty is further exuded when his wife condemns him to a life stuck in his wolf form; when the king stumbles across the werewolf and decides to adopt it, “[the king] considered the wolf to be a great wonder and loved it dearly, commanding all his people to guard it well for love of him [...]” and the wolf appears to appreciate him just as much: “Wherever the king might go, it never wanted to be left behind. It accompanied him constantly and showed clearly that it loved him” (70). The king demonstrates the contrasting view of the knight’s beastly nature in comparison to the latter’s wife: as opposed to horror, he looks on the wolf with astonishment and acceptance. The king’s respect is met with a mutual loyalty by the werewolf, expressing the power of selfless love. The knight, even in the beastly form that his wife despised and rejected him for, demonstrates his undying loyalty and selflessness that he displayed as a human. The relationship between the knight and the king is that of mutual love and respect, an unwavering loyalty that was not found in the knight’s wife; consequently, the knight finds someone who cares for him and lives a much more fulfilled life and not one of fear and concealment like it was previously.

The knight’s wife, on the other hand, exhibits selfish love, and her fate further expresses de France’s condemnation for those who love selfishly. After hearing the news her husband gives her, she quickly decides that she will not lie with him any more and immediately turns away to a knight she never loved, “offer[ing] [him her] love and [her] body” (69). The wife exhibits self-centered love because she appears to be mortified at the notion of being wed to a werewolf and not a man, suggesting a shallow, more physical form of love in which she seeks him for what he can physically provide. She cannot look past her loving husband’s physical affliction and see him as a man who loves her unconditionally; somewhat ironically, her horror at his physical defect causes her to give herself up physically to a man she never loved just to

escape from her otherwise loving and loyal husband. Her fate also serves as Marie's lesson on selfish love, for the king "banished the woman from the country[... and] many of the women in the family [...] were born without noses and lived noseless [after the knight bit off her nose as a wolf]" (72). Her ex-husband gives her a physical defect by taking off her nose and cursing her children with the same affliction. This punishment serves as a form of justice for the misdeed that she committed to a man who loved her dearly. In essence, her inability to look past her husband's physical flaw eventually cost her by afflicting her with very own physical flaw and her offspring too. Furthermore, her selfishness changed the course of her life over the course of the story: had she been more altruistic and loved her husband despite his affliction, she would still be wed to a loving knight and not banished from the kingdom; instead, she eloped with a man she did not truly love and no longer has a home.

The contrast between the knight and his wife expresses the need to remain loyal to one's partner and to love them as a sum of their parts, not selfishly for their physical body or some other reason. The fact that the knight had his land returned to him and was appreciated by the king for his service and the knight's wife was physically impaired and banished from the kingdom after her misdeeds demonstrates the notion that loving selflessly yields great rewards. By loving in this way, people show others that they truly appreciate them for who they are and not just for superficial reasons. Only then can trust be formed and a true relationship be established. At the same time, the story of *Bisclavret* serves as a cautionary tale for those like the knight, those who love compassionately but might not receive that same love in return. The story further emphasizes not only loving other people for who they are and being a loyal friend or companion to them but also finding someone for a partner or friends who love and appreciate someone for who they are.

Works Cited

De France, Marie. *The Lais of Marie De France*. Translated by Keith Busby and Glyn S. Burgess, Penguin Books Ltd, 1999.