

A Werewolf Is: Identifying the Werewolf in Marie de France's *Bisclavret*

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A Problematic Definition?

Whereas the Oxford English Dictionary defines a werewolf as “a person who . . . was transformed or was capable of transforming himself at times into a wolf,”¹ Marie de France’s lai *Bisclavret* has a somewhat different definition. After describing the reality of “many men [turning] into werewolves [then going] to live in the woods,”² de France states that “a werewolf is a ferocious beast which, when possessed by this madness, devours men, causes great damage and dwells in vast forests.”³ de France’s intention is to provide her readers with a means of identifying the werewolf when it appears in her lai. Yet if the concept of werewolves would have been known to her audience, why would Marie de France feel the need to provide her readers with this aid?

The narrator’s definition of a werewolf seems to serve as a point of clarification, helping the reader properly identify the man-devouring werewolf from the man-honoring werewolf. For, problematically, *Bisclavret* is not a man-devouring beast possessed by madness, nor does he spend the remainder of his days living in the woods. How, then, is *he* a werewolf? The definition is not simply concerned with giving physical details, but goes further, explaining that what werewolves do, by definition, is devour men and live in the woods. *Bisclavret*’s bout of “madness,”⁴ moreover, is not randomly brought about by an animal impulse, but is a reaction to the offense and dishonor and shame

¹ "werewolf | werwolf, n.". OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/227846?redirectedFrom=werewolf&> (accessed March 18, 2014).

² p.72.

³ibid.

⁴ See, p.75.

his wife's actions bring about. Her cruelty toward Bisclavret, in fact, devours his humanity, reduces him to beast, and, therefore, reveals that it is not Bisclavret who is the real werewolf but his wife.

Bisclavret's Nobility

From the onset of the text, Bisclavret is introduced as “a man highly praised . . . a good and handsome knight who conducted himself nobly.”⁵ He is “well loved by all his neighbors,” according to de France, and loved his wife.⁶ After being semi-permanently transformed into a physical werewolf, the descriptions of Bisclavret's nobility increase rather than decrease. Bisclavret “did not want to be separated from [the king] and had no wish to abandon him”⁷(i.e. he was faithful), “was loved by everyone and so noble and gentle a beast was it that it never attempted attempted to cause any harm.”⁸

As mentioned above, it is only at the sight of his wife and her lover that Bisclavret grows “made” and desires to revenge himself. The violence which he does engage in, however, causes those who observe it and are “greatly astonished”⁹ to say that “he would not have done it without good reason. The knight [whom he attacked] had wronged him somehow or other, for [Bisclavret] was bent on revenge.”¹⁰ Bisclavret is such an outstandingly noble figure that his violent attacks on his wife are not met

⁵ p.72.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ p.74

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ p.75.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

with immediate judicial action, but spur on an investigation into the cause of his abnormal behavior.¹¹

Bisclavret's "Wife"

Over the course of the narrative, the woman who betrays Bisclavret is referred to as his "wife," despite the fact that she "betrayed and wronged"¹² him. Given the Christian context in which this text was composed, moreover, the woman's behavior should have been, and perhaps de France's audience did so, viewed as adultery. The title "Bisclavret's wife," therefore, simultaneously denies this woman the respect of particularity (i.e. she is a nameless wife) and condemns her as an adulteress. And, indeed, this is de France's depiction of Bisclavret's wife throughout the text.

Bisclavret pleads with his wife for "mercy," yet she is indifferent to the fact that if he tells her his secret "great harm will come to [him], for as a result [he] will lose her love and destroy [himself]."¹³ The text goes on to say that "she tormented and harried him,"¹⁴ forcing him to further reveal his secrets to her, despite the harm it would inflict upon him. The torment she inflicts on men, however, is not limited to Bisclavret. Upon deciding to betray her husband, Bisclavret's wife

sent a messenger to summon a knight who lived in the region and who had loved her a long time, wooed her ardently and served her generously. She had never loved him or promised him her affection *but now she told him what was on her mind.*

¹¹ pp.75-76.

¹² p.74.

¹³ p.72.

¹⁴ p.73.

‘Friend,’ she said, ‘rejoice: without further delay *I grant you that which has tormented you; never again will you encounter any refusal.*’¹⁵

Bisclavret’s wife is revealed to be an adulteress and torturer of the men who are attracted to her, willing to serve her, and willing to “open up” to her.

Reciprocal Retribution & Exile

The references to the torture inflicted on the abovementioned men are seemingly insignificant, until, that is, de France reintroduces Bisclavret’s wife toward the end of the lai. de France explains that the king “took the lady away and subjected her to *torture.*”¹⁶ Bisclavret’s wife is now subject to torture for the sake of confession, receiving a form retribution reciprocal to the crime she committed against Bisclavret and her (illegitimate) new husband. de France further states that the torture

made her reveal everything about her husband: how she had betrayed him and taken his clothes, about his account of what happened, what became of him and where he went.¹⁷

The werewolf, as noted above, is a beast that devours men, causes great damage, and dwells in vast forests. Up to this point, Bisclavret’s wife has not dwelt in vast forests. However, subsequent to being tortured, Bisclavret’s wife is sent into exile. The king, de France reports, “banished the woman

¹⁵ pp.73-74. (emphasis added)

¹⁶ p.76. (emphasis added)

¹⁷ *ibid.*

from the country,”¹⁸ and “restored [Bisclavret’s] land to him.”¹⁹

The Woman as Man-Devouring Werewolf

The symmetrical structuring of de France’s lai places an antithetical parallel before the reader that subverts commonly held assumptions about gender relations in the Medieval era. It is not the man who is, in the end, the man-devouring werewolf who causes destruction and lives in vast forests - it is the woman. Bisclavret’s wife tortures men, subjects them to her, forces them to comply with her wishes, and thus can be said to devour them, albeit in a figurative sense. Bisclavret’s wife, moreover, destroys her husbands. Bisclavret is reduced to a beast; her new husband is rendered by her an accomplice to her immoralities. Lastly, Bisclavret’s wife is left to wander the vast spaces of uncivilized land (i.e. the area outside of Brittany), and dwell there.

Considering that Bisclavret never fits de France’s definition of a werewolf, and considering that his wife *does*, it does not seem to indicate that de France was portraying the *devolution* of Bisclavret’s wife. Rather, de France’s treatment of the man and the woman force the reader to peer beyond appearances that can cloud their judgment. Contemporary discussions concerning female agency in the Medieval era would do well to consider the “role reversals” in this lai. Women may have been at a disadvantage in many respects; yet Marie de France’s concrete example of the psychological torture women at this time were capable of performing (and hiding under appearances to the contrary) demonstrates that such a binarily informed reconstruction of historically ensconced subjects (ontological and aesthetic) is at best misinformed and at worst violently sexist.

¹⁸ p.76.

¹⁹ *ibid.*