

The Naked Beast:  
Clothing and Humanity  
in Bisclavret

The figure of the werewolf has a long and impressive history which may be traced to classical antiquity and beyond. Greek and Latin mythographers recount the legend of the Arcadian King Lycaon who was turned into a wolf; in his Satiricon, Petronius gives them one of their earliest literary representations when the tale of Niceros' captain is recounted at Trimalchio's dinner; even Pliny includes werewolves in his Natural History, although he does express his disbelief in their existence.<sup>1</sup> Religious rituals and related phenomena, such as the Lupercalia, celebrated in mid-February, or the wolf-moon, a full-moon falling on Friday the 13th, remind us of the ambivalent fear-attraction excited by wolves. Perhaps some of the fascination with the werewolf derives from its paradoxical status. Part-man, part-beast, the dual nature of the werewolf epitomizes the dilemma of humankind which must battle the forces of good and evil within. Often the creature is depicted in an ambiguous way: an unwilling victim of some evil or sorcery who through no fault of his own turns into a beast. And, although the human side is repressed when the beast takes over, remorse and regret may follow the periods of rampage. Yet even when pity is felt for the werewolf, it is at best ephemeral. These man-beasts wreak havoc when let loose in society; they are destructive forces which subvert the social system.<sup>2</sup> The heroes are those who kill the beast and return society to its civilized order, ruled by justice and reason.

What then are we to make of Marie de France's Bisclavret, the werewolf who is the eponymous hero of the tale? Marie readily acknowledges both

learned and popular traditions that werewolves are wild beasts who devour men and run rampant in the forest:

Garualf, c(eo) est beste salvage:  
Tant cum il est en cele rage,  
Hummes devure, grant mal fait,  
Es granz forez converse e vait.

(vv. 9-12)

Although Marie knows well the habits of the "classical" werewolf, it is not that creature which fires her imagination. Rather, she relegates it to an historic past by qualifying its existence with "jadis." Indeed, that figure will play no part in her account and she dismisses its story summarily: "Cest afere les ore ester" (v. 13). Thus, she begins her narrative with a clear refusal of the traditional werewolf, known to the Latin writers with whose works she was conversant, the "anciens" to whom she refers in the General Prologue to her lays. Marie breaks with the preceding thematic narrative tradition through the creation of Bisclavret and transforms the werewolf into a creature whose subversiveness will not be directed against society. Rather, through a series of ironic thematic twists, Bisclavret is not only changed into an ill-treated and betrayed husband, but into a sympathetic character whose "beastliness" will both serve justice and restore a certain order, albeit one which is different from that at the outset of the tale.

Unlike another werewolf, Méli<sup>3</sup>on, whose voluntary metamorphosis relies upon the stones of a magical ring, Marie makes Bisclavret an unfortunate who has no control over his nature. His unwilling transformation is cyclical and is framed by undressing--removing the outward covering of humanness, and redressing--covering savagery that

has been exposed.<sup>4</sup> Bisclavret's ritual culminates in the donning of garments. Here Marie astutely retains a thread from the text of the "anciens": that the werewolf must have his own clothing if he is to regain his human form. Both Ovid and Pliny in their accounts of werewolves stress the need for the same clothing for the transformation from wolf to man.<sup>5</sup> The return of Bisclavret's own clothing will uncover his wife's duplicity and reveal his hidden identity. Moreover, Marie uses undressing and dressing as metaphors for the multiple layers of her text.

Bisclavret is a fragmented, hypernarrated tale. The disclosure of Bisclavret's secret through a series of questions posed by his spouse uncovers the first layers of the narrative. Capitulating to his wife's astute psychological manipulation, Bisclavret reveals the source of his recurrent absences. Before he has an opportunity to speak, Marie intervenes, using her authority as teller of the lays:

s'aventure li cunta;  
nule chose ne li cela.  
(vv. 61-63)

Here "s'aventure" is not the story of the lay; rather Marie lays on the full weight of its etymology, "ce qui advient", so that it becomes the truth of Bisclavret's identity (vv. 63-66). This first telling is framed by the narrative introduction cited above and Marie's deliberately misleading evaluation: "il li aveit tut cunte" (v. 67). The qualifier "tut" refers only to the reason behind his disappearances, for that is all his wife has requested; Marie knows that there is more to come, but she lets this narrative unfold at its narrator's pace. Bisclavret, however, proves a most reluctant narrator, not at all anxious to get

down to the naked truth. He rejects all opportunities to gloss, and instead limits his reply to the letter, not the spirit of the question.<sup>6</sup>

An abrupt shift in narrative strategies occurs with the wife's second question, "s'il se des-puille u vet vestu" (v. 69). Marie takes the tale in hand again on both the thematic and the formal levels. The wife's question, which links the motif of clothing to Bisclavret's narrative, is informed by the same knowledge of werewolf lore that Marie displayed earlier in her prologue to the tale. By placing the wife's words in indirect discourse, Marie creates a doubling effect between her voice and that of the wife. Where the direct question fails, the indirect questions succeeds, posed once and then reiterated, as it were, by Marie. Bisclavret is trapped like the animal he becomes between two levels of narrative, and admits that he sheds his clothes, thus shedding light on the mystery. As if emboldened by this revelation, the wife's third question crosses back to direct discourse: "u unt voz dras" (v. 71); Bisclavret's equally direct reply is that he wants the hiding place to remain obscure: "ne voil k'il seit seü" (v. 78). This game of verbal hide and seek is quickly ended by Marie, who forces the narrative to turn back in on itself, and Bisclavret finds himself again caught up in its shifting levels. His wife's reproach "nel me devez nient celer" (v.81) echoes Marie who has already said that Bisclavret hid nothing. The requisite honesty imposed upon Bisclavret--he must hide nothing from his wife--and the full force of the wife's imperative depend upon Marie's knowledge and rely upon her authority that he indeed hid nothing. Once Bisclavret discloses the hiding place, his "aventure" is completely out in the open; no important details have been overlooked. But now Bisclavret's wife is privy to his story. She

possesses all the elements of his narrative which she can restructure to suit her own ends and she will perforce become the author of his fate.

The telling of Bisclavret's "aventure" proceeds in the form of a discontinuous narrative, progressing by starts and stops, shifting back and forth between levels of discourse. The different segments of the narrative begin to overlap and pile up upon each other. All the while Marie's characters relate little more than the bare facts, loosely connected fragments woven together by Marie to constitute the text. The complicity between Marie and Bisclavret's wife that served to bring the truth into the open also brings the narrative to a provisional halt. The exposition of the "aventure" is now completed. As long as Bisclavret can regain possession of the clothes he abandons at the moment of his transformation, the narrative cannot go beyond the opening and closing features of this "aventure." Bisclavret's true story, which repeats itself in some obscure manner every week, is unknown and untellable. His metamorphosis from man to beast is discreet. He undresses away from all viewers so that whatever is revealed is at the same time hidden.

The absences which so distressed his wife parallel the absence of development of the "aventure"; what happens during those three days remains the unspoken story of the beast among beasts and has no human voice. It is little wonder, then, that the "merveille" uncovered by Bisclavret's confession, the particularity of his "aventure" frightens his wife. She rushes to cover up the truth of Bisclavret's disappearances and put an end to the cycle. The wife calls upon a "chevalier de la cuntrée," a suitor she had once rejected, and, assuming the role of narrator, she recounts the "aventure." Repeated to the chevalier, the

original tale, Bisclavret's narration "aventure" which took the form of confessional autobiography, is turned into a second narrative by the wife who becomes his faithful yet unfaithful biographer. Just as her account fills in the reason for Bisclavret's mysterious absences, so will Bisclavret's conjugal absence soon be filled by the chevalier whom the wife orders to steal Bisclavret's "despuille," the covering of humanity he must leave behind. Not only does the wife hold the truth, she also controls access to it. Here, the wife takes over as narrator from Bisclavret, and the chevalier takes over as husband. As Michelle Freeman notes:

Just as the nature of the bisclavret is about the taking off and the putting on of clothes (and identities) so the narrative revolves about the removal of self-narrative, or confession, where one side of the person describes the other by verbally disrobing it, and then reassembling these layers (the verbal segments of the confession) (293).

The theft and hiding of Bisclavret's clothing generate a third narrative. It is the wife's cloaking of her betrayal in secrecy rather than the uncovering of Bisclavret's identity which leads to a new "aventure," one which breaks the natural cycle of his metamorphosis and condemns him to the silence of the forest. Bisclavret's three-day "aventure" moves into a new temporal sequence; a year passes and his lengthy absence forces the presumption of his death. A parallel but equally silent narrative co-exists with Bisclavret's untellable story: the account of his disappearance. The presumed death is the conclusion of some unknown "aventure" of the wife's fabrication; thus a false "aventure" has been

circulating at the court all the while that Bisclavret remains in the forest.

Even when he is "discovered" by the King, Bisclavret's true identity remains hidden, for the King recognizes only the "beste" and its "merveille." Marie uses the episode at the court to reinforce the earlier distinction between "aventure" and "merveille," a distinction which is of capital importance to distinguish among the narratives. From the moment that the King first sees Bisclavret in the forest until the wife is forced to speak, we are repeatedly confronted by the terms "beste" and some form of "merveille," yet not once is the "aventure" mentioned. Bisclavret's story is unintelligible to the members of the court. Yet this is the very "aventure" that Marie is telling; she has taken over as narrator from the wife to stitch together her tale: a patchwork made up of the preceding two narratives (Bisclavret's confession and his wife's "biography") as well as the silent "aventure" of the forest. Marie intervenes, reasserting her own authority as narrator: "OÛz apres cument avint!" (v. 185), so that all the fragments may become coherent and comprehensible. Before the King and his court are able to understand the "aventure," its underlying layers must be exposed by the wife who again takes up the role of narrator:

Tut li cunta de sun seigneur:

Coment ele l'aveit trahi

E sa despoille li toli,

l'aventure qu'il li cunta.

E quei devint e u ala;

Puis que ses dras li ot toluz.

(vv. 266-71, my emphasis)

The wife admits authorship for the new "aventure," the one which led up to her being questioned at

the court. Once again the confessional mode leads to the revealing of Bisclavret's hidden identity. The shift from Bisclavret as confessant to the wife reveals her hidden identity as well: the widow who mourned the loss of her husband is the creator of that loss. At the same time, this turnabout reverses the tale's opening discovery: the man was shown to be a beast; now the beast is shown to be a man. Further, the beast/man coupling repeats perfectly the sequence of the lay's prologue in which werewolf as "beste savage" is opposed to Bisclavret, the "beaus chevalers." This "mise en abyme" of the narrative reveals all the layers and retraces all that has happened to Bisclavret: the first disclosure and its cover-up; the silent "aventure" of the forest; and the second disclosure which both includes all the previous elements and presupposes the events that follow.

When Bisclavret's clothing is finally restored, it is his turn to put back on his cover-up, for his tale, having now been told, is over. His return to human form is the end of his "aventure." Once again the passage from beast to man is discreet, taking place as it does away from public view in the King's bedchamber. The shift from forest to palace as the site of Bisclavret's transformation makes clear his re-integration into society and order. Yet the paradox of Bisclavret's return to human form within the boundaries of society is apparent: even though the werewolf is gone, the truth of his existence cannot be "glossed over." What has once been uncovered, is no longer truly hidden; it has just been dressed up for appearance in public.

The wife's importance as narrator remains constant within the structure of the lay, yet there is a movement beyond the boundaries of the



lay itself. The tale she recounted at the court, her confession of the complete version of Bisclavret's "aventure," is not identical with the subject of the implied future narrative. His story will become the first narrative segment of her own story, for while Bisclavret's "aventure" ends at the court, the wife's only begins there: the "aventure" of the noseless woman. The silent tale will be told and retold by the wife and her female descendants, the "esnasées" who bear the mark of the beast.<sup>7</sup> Here, it seems that the patrilineal descent of the narrative of the werewolf, that is the traditions of the "anciens," has been replaced by a matrilineal descended narrative. One might be tempted to deduce that Marie, a woman, would logically model her tales to accommodate a female-voiced narrative. And one might go so far as to suggest that the mutilation of the wife is a necessary disfiguration: only with her beauty gone can she assume the male role of narrator. But to say that Marie identifies herself with the wife is, I believe, a reading that does not account for all the narrative levels of Bisclavret. Moreover, it is too simplistic. Indeed, many pages have been written pointing out that Marie does not always take the side of her female characters, and one of the examples most often cited is Bisclavret.<sup>8</sup>

The key to the subversiveness of Marie's tale and to her establishing a narrative voice depends upon a movement which uses the wife to subvert the figure of the werewolf. While the lay follows the pattern of order/disorder/order, the order found at its conclusion is not an order that has been restored but rather an order that has been newly created by the punishment meted out by the werewolf against the treacherous wife. Its brutality may strike modern readers as excessive, but our sensibilities should not interfere with notions of

medieval justice--the cutting off of a nose was not an unknown punishment for treason. Although Marie's refusal of allegiance to the wife is nowhere more evident than in this scene, we cannot totally overlook the earlier blending of her voice with the wife's. It appears, rather, that in an astute shift of allegiances which parallels the structuring of the lay, Marie abandons the wife as the wife had abandoned Bisclavret.

The General Prologue informs us that the lays are intended as a present which Marie would offer to the king. Her concern is that she not be thought "surquidie," that is, presumptuous, for such a daring undertaking. Marie's posture anticipates Bisclavret, for he too humbles himself in front of the King:

Vers lui curut quere merci.  
Il l'aveit pris par sun estrié,  
La jambe li baise et le pié . . .  
Cum ceste beste se humilie!

(vv. 146-48; 153)

Bisclavret becomes a part of the King's household and depends upon his kindness much as Marie might depend upon royal patronage. Yet Marie undermines the easy parallels of these similarities with her description of the King's joy at seeing the knight asleep in his bed and goes so far as to suggest an overly affective relation between the King and Bisclavret, one which, if pursued, would be clearly out of place now that Bisclavret has regained his human form. Here the bending of gender limitations when the King takes Bisclavret in his arms to kiss him is not so dissimilar from Marie's own bending of gender limitations when she takes up her quill to write. Moreover, just as Bisclavret breaks with the dictates of royal authority when he administers his own justice and punishes his

wife's treason, so does Marie break out of the limits of the authority of the "anciens" when she rewrites the myth of the werewolf.

Earlier I stated that it would be simplistic to read the wife as Marie despite their common trait as narrator. Indeed, she is Bisclavret, too. Freeman uses "androgynous" to characterize Marie's poetic voice, a quality which suggests an accord between Marie and her male characters. Yet, in many ways the harmony inherent in the term seems to downplay the discordant elements in Bisclavret. The violence of Marie's rejection of the wife does not negate the mingling of her voice with the wife's, a mingling which does not occur between Marie's voice and Bisclavret's. Thus, while Freeman would valorize the identification of Marie with Bisclavret to the detriment of the wife, I would elaborate the argument on two levels: Marie and Bisclavret as condemned by nature (woman/werewolf) over which neither has any control and Marie and the wife as narrators of tales which they appropriate and manipulate for their own ends--with no judgment placed upon those ends.

To represent herself, Marie must adopt a series of shifting postures which follow the shifts in the narrative and narrators. Only the wife can uncover what Bisclavret wants hidden; she must expose Bisclavret's dual identity. The theft of Bisclavret's clothing generates the récit which will eventually be told both by the wife and Marie. But were she to limit herself to the wife, Marie's tale would not create the new order necessary for her poetic voice. She must sacrifice the wife--who will bear the mark of the beast--for Bisclavret. She must allow for the return of Bisclavret's clothing to restore his humanity and complete the transformation from beast to man.

The werewolf is recognized for what he is, yet his presence within society is accepted. Marie's metamorphosis is completed as well. For, if Bisclavret's uniqueness comes from the fact that he is both man and beast, then Marie's inherent uniqueness is that she is both woman and writer.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pliny's skepticism here is worthy of note: "homines in lupos verti rurusque restitui sibi falsum esse confidentur existimare debemus aut credere omnia quae fabulosa tot saeculis conperimus" (we are bound to pronounce with confidence that the story of men being turned into wolves and restored to themselves again is false--or else we must believe all the tales that the experience of so many centuries has taught us to be fabulous) (8:80) because Marie obviously contradicts his authority. Not only is the existence of the werewolf affirmed by her lay, the "sage hume" of the king's court also recognizes the marvelous as possible: "Meinte merveille avum veüe, / Ki en Bretaigne est avenue" (vv. 249-50).

<sup>2</sup> Nowhere is this view more evident than in medieval society which drew a parallel between the wolves and criminals: "wargus," the term which appears in Frankish and Norman law, means "wolf" as well as "criminal." Anglo-Saxon law held that outlaws must wear the head of a wolf. For a more complete discussion, see Smith, p. 27. Charlotte F. Otten's recent anthology, A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Culture, (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986) provides a broad yet useful introduction to the topic in general. For further reading relating to werewolf lore and Marie de France, there are a variety of sources, some scholarly, some rather fanciful, e.g. Manfred Bambeck, "Das Werwolf-motiv in Bisclavret" (ZRP 89), 123-47; Sabine Baring-Gould, The Book of Were-wolves: Being an Account of a Terrible Superstition. Rpt. (New York: Causeway Books, 1973); M. Faure, "Le Bisclavret de Marie de France: Une Histoire suspecte de loup-garou" (Revue des Langues Romanes 1978; 83), 345-56; Harry A. Senn, Werewolf and Vampire in Romania,

East European Monographs (NY: Columbia UP, 1982); François Suard, "Bisclavret et les contes de loup-garou: Essai d'interprétation" [Marche Romane 1980; 30 (3-4)], 37-48; Montague Summers, The Werewolf (London: Kegan Paul, 1933).

<sup>3</sup> The anonymous lay Méliion is thought to derive from Marie's Bisclavret, but other than the thematic links of the werewolf and an unfaithful wife, the resemblance between the two lays is limited, e.g., it is the adulterous squire who related Méliion's story, not the wife. The intrusion of this "third party" narrator would have been impossible in Marie's tale where, as we shall show, the unfolding of the lay is coextensive with the interplay of narrative voices of Marie and the wife.

<sup>4</sup> Images of the wild-man running naked in the forest are not hard to find in medieval literature, and links between clothing and humanness have a history at least as long as that of the werewolf. One need only recall the story of "Legion" in Luke 8: 27-35 in which nakedness exposes savagery and demonic possession, while clothing is a sign of sanity and salvation. Even Méliion must take off his clothes before his ring works its magic. A similar, albeit seemingly contradictory, ritual of "putting on the wolf" also exists, in which the covering of oneself with the skin of a beast coincides with acts of extreme violence and savagery -- this was done, for example, by the members of the Haberfeldtrieben in the Germanic tradition or the Scandinavian berserkirs--or with an "actual" metamorphosis into a wolf, as in the case of the Volsungs. A related account of wolfskin as covering appears in Giraldus Cambrensis whose Topographia Hibernica dates from ca. 1182-83 and would thus be contemporary with Marie's Lais. Gerald tells of a priest who

comes upon two wolves, one of whom requests the last rites for his companion, who is his wife. When the priest objects that he cannot give the sacraments to a wolf, the husband demonstrates his wife's humanness: "pellam totam a capite lupae retrahens, usque ad umbilicum replicavit: et statim expressa forma vetulae cujusdam apparuit" (101). The "Christianization" of these werewolves recalls Bisclavret's leaving his clothing by a chapel. The "moderns" (Gerald and Marie) can see beyond the beastly exterior and can express a certain sympathy for the creature.

<sup>5</sup> For Pliny, this is another example of the incredible: "addit quoque fabulosius eandem recipere vestem!" (8:81) whereas Marie ignores Pliny's disbelief and makes the return of Bisclavret's clothing the central element of her story.

<sup>6</sup> "Gloss" and "letter" are not terms that can be lightly bandied about in any discussion of the Lais. While my use here depends principally upon a conjunction of "gloss over" and the "letter" of law, the resonances with the General Prologue are not lost. Moreover, they recall Foulet and Uitti's revision of the General Prologue in which they take "lursen" to refer to the Ancients: "a tightly organized, and coherent process--a process typical of Marie's expressive manner and logical mind--is adumbrated: a somewhat obscure meaning ---> THE MEANING MADE CLEAR ---> the preservation of the meaning" (247). The pattern they establish can easily be superimposed on Bisclavret: the hidden story of Bisclavret is exposed and then preserved by the wife as "esnasée."

<sup>7</sup> Freeman reads "esnasée" as the third (Francien) version of "bisclavret", citing a trilingual naming pattern in the Lais (cf. Laustic). The implications of "esnasée" are much more radical,

for it introduces a new name, at the conclusion of the lay, for what Marie has told is ultimately the "story of origin of the noseless women."

<sup>8</sup> Huchet, for example, tries to build a case for male-voiced narrative here in a way which I find inconsistent with the rest of the lay. He would equate the "esnasée" with castration while reducing the negative representations of women to a standard clerical misogyny. The argument seems somewhat confused and points to one of the paradoxical elements of the many analyses of the lay. If Marie presents a "bad" female character, there is frequent critical astonishment, yet the same astonishment is not generated when she presents a "good" male character. A "case" could be made for the wife's conduct in Bisclavret: a happily married woman wonders with justification why her husband is mysteriously absent three days a week. She finally gets him to reveal the truth (he's a werewolf)--which throws her into a not unreasonable panic. She calls upon an ex-suitor to help her rid herself and society of the beast and tells some story which saves her reputation, as well as her husband's. That Bisclavret is ultimately the hero of the lay depends little upon clerical misogyny. Rather, it is a function of the complex nature of Marie's narrative.



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