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Justice, Democracy, and Freedom in the Middle Ages: The Fables by Marie de France

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ABSTRACT

It might be surprising, and yet it can certainly be confirmed that the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France offered in her Fables (ca. 1190) a wide range of political, social, moral, and philosophical notions about the way people within her society should and could live together in a peaceful, just, and respectful manner. She did not question the foundations of feudalism or of monarchy, but she developed strong messages about ethical principles that should guide all individuals in their living together, irrespective of social classes, implying the close observation of privileges and obligations, responsibilities and duties to the collective. We do not find in Marie a social revolutionary; instead, she voices simply deep concerns about injustice, violation of the laws and the principles of ethics, and thus criticizes many shortcomings within her time, which all prove to be rather telling for our modern world, at least in the West. Although she was certainly not a revolutionary, she clearly signaled her deep concerns about the global problems and failures within her society, and this is rather contrary to most of our expectations of the medieval world. Drawing from her fables, we find ourselves in the unique opportunity to reflect on fundamental concerns in all human interactions, both in the past and the present. In short, as I will argue, her short verse narratives provide us with an amazing literary compass regarding conflicts and tensions, human desires, feelings, and values in all our lives, seen here through a medieval lens. We can even discover comments about the need for individual freedom, contrary to modern assumptions about the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Social Justice; Fairness; Lawfulness; Marie de France; Fables; Dictatorship

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1. Introduction

All three terms used here in the title seem to contradict the very common notion of medieval society. Those terms are better, so we might think, associated with the modern world when Enlightenment finally began to illuminate people and laid the foundation for a post-feudal, early democratic system where the individual could enjoy justice and freedom. Of course, medieval kingship was not simply a dictatorship or a tyranny; there were many laws in place, kings were certainly dependent on their barons' or lords' approval and could under certain circumstances even be impeached and removed from their throne if they failed to live up to the global expectations. Power structures throughout time have not been written in stone, even if, from the distance of today, overly rigid conditions seem to have ruled favoring an all-mighty king and a dominating aristocratic class. Societies have always been determined by hierarchies, and even today, there have always been forms of injustice, repression, disregard of laws, mistreatment. We hope, of course, that postmodern society is moving forward, develops better laws for everyone, offers more opportunities for previously marginalized individuals, aims for equality as much as possible, and treats everyone with respect and a high degree of tolerance.

In reality, however, which does not need to be documented or discussed much further below, all legal and political systems are only constructs by people and often rather noble endeavors to build a functioning society determined by laws, properly appointed judges, ethical and moral principles and values. However, there is never a guarantee that justice and liberty can be enjoyed by everyone, if those two concepts were even considered in the first place. That means, there is no election system, for instance, that guarantees complete fairness for all, and this not even today. We might approximate that goal, but as history has taught us, the true ideals remain just that, ideals some people constantly aspire for but we know only too well that those might be too elusive to become reality.

These comments are not intended to shed pessimistic light on our current situation; our concrete reality is simply a fraught phenomenon that tends to miss the desired mark, as the current situation in the United States, but then also in many other allegedly democratic countries indicates. Indeed, the list of countries that pretend to be liberal, democratic, and determined by justice and yet operate in rather different terms would be much longer than the list of countries where democracy has really taken deep roots and operates equally, fairly, and justly.

This might be nothing but a political jeremiad, but it can serve us well as the springboard for cultural-historical reflections because all political systems are the result of long-term (sometimes, of course, also radical and short-term) processes [1-5]. Scholars have already observed and dissected a profound discourse on political problems and conflicts in the Middle Ages, emphasizing that the contemporaries were already very aware of many tensions, disagreements, internecine stife, civil war, and the like Just as today in many, if not in all countries all over the world, when there is no strong leader, when the constitution is weak, when the laws are not obeyed, when arbitrary power grabs determine everyday life, when corruption becomes the modus vivendi for the powerful and rich, people begin to fight against each other, and ideology and money trump values and ideals [6].

The theoretical discourse, however, was primarily pursued by philosophers and theologians, whereas literary authors have rarely been included in this exploration of public criticism of evil kings. However, disregarding famous King Arthur as a sort of mythical ruler, whom we now can actually identify in historical terms[7], many poets had rather strong opinions about justice, freedom, generosity, kindness, fairness, and aristocratic values embedded in social consciousness. As we will observe below, maybe contrary to common expectations, political freedom was certainly one ideal publicly discussed already in the twelfth century.

In fact, most of our modern assumptions about medieval kings would need a critical re-examination because they often did not wield as much power as the glorious images from the past seem to indicate, and because they faced many more internal challenges than we might have thought possible. Also, it might amount to a misconception if we simply assume that medieval poets were ignorant and dismissive of the poor people, the rural population, the weak and the sick, and hence simply left them on the sideline when discussing the lives of their courtly or heroic protagonists. On the contrary, if we shift our focus and

consider what pre-modern sources might reveal about the conditions of the homeless, hungry, marginalized, and suffering poor, we would read even courtly romances in quite a different light [8]. Much depends on our willingness to study our canonical but also non-canonical texts in light of social, political, philosophical, and religious conflicts and tensions and to pay attention to the narrative background. Moreover, we must not forget that some of the strongest philosophical voices were highly critical of evil rulers, such as John of Salisbury [9]and Marsilius of Padua (see the contributions to Mulieri, Masolini, and Pelletier [10].

The large corpus of 'Mirrors for Princes' addressing young and old rulers or their heirs, indicates how much individual writers were deeply concerned about the ethical framework which a king or a lord ought to observe and yet often did not do properly. Didactic poets throughout the centuries equally formulated severe warnings and appealed to the audiences to pay close attention to their advice regarding political and social principles [11-12]. Already in the pre-modern era, as we can thus conclude preliminarily, to rule over a country and a people constituted a difficult challenge and required much experience, strong values, ethical and moral ideals, and a strong ability to listen to advisors, to people's suffering, to internal and external problems, and to strive for a global improvement of the entire society.

This paper does not intend to open once again the Pandora box of analyzing the wide field of medieval politics. It would also be too far-fetched to offer comparative perspectives of political systems because the differences between the various kings or other rulers in the many parts of pre-modern Europe were rather considerable, despite the many similarities. It also deserves notice that the concepts of justice and injustice have recently gained much traction in medieval research [13-14]. Instead, my purpose is to turn to a highly popular anthology of fables written by the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France, her Fables [15], where we are refreshingly confronted by a surprisingly sensitive perspective regarding the social and political ills at that time as perceived by this famous female poet.

Even though numerous scholars have already discussed these fables from a variety of perspectives, in light of the current political malaise in the twenty-first century it seems to be highly appropriate to investigate once again what this medieval female writer had to say about injustice, the abuse of the poor folks by the rich and mighty ones, and about the dangers of political and economic manipulations by the elite. Numerous times, Marie reflected on the position and responsibilities of the king and voiced very specific comments about the consequences of a king not living up to the general expectations. There are hardly any similar narratives from her time (the late twelfth century), but the criticism of evil kings grew in intensity during the late Middle Ages when especially Emperor Charlemagne was ridiculed or critiqued by numerous French, Dutch, and German writers (e.g., Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken).

On the one hand, we face the curious situation of dealing with a very traditional genre that went back to ancient times (Aesop) and so could not have directly mirrored the social-historical conditions of the late twelfth century [16-17]; on the other, Marie belonged to the aristocracy and lived, as far as we can tell, in late twelfth-century England [18], either at the royal court or in a monastery. Why would she then have been interested in the lives of the ordinary and poor people? What might she have thought about the abuses committed by her aristocratic contemporaries? And how can we profit from a critical reading of her fables today as a literary platform of trenchant political and social=historical criticism?

As Howard R. Bloch has already noted, "The Fables are about nothing if not about the taming of the feudal beast, the institutionalization of the violence of the feudal world, in which, as in the animal kingdom, the law of the strongest prevailed; and this within the new civil space of city and court in which the predatory instinct... takes the form of envy [19]. Undoubtedly, Marie resorted to this traditional genre of the fable in order to reflect upon social injustice, abuse, and maltreatment of the downtrodden by the members of the elite. But could we agree with Bloch that "Marie seems resigned before the abuse of seigneurial power" (190)? Should we follow the near consensus that the poet embraced a monarchical view and would not have supported a radical change of the social and economic structure [20-23].

Such discussions do not take us very far because no one would even expect to discover in Marie de France a medieval 'democrat' avant la lettre. Instead, it would be much more productive to investigate how she criticized the

social system she lived in and what she had to say about the moral and ethical issues affecting everyone in the case of violence, misuse of power, and criminal activities. After all, whenever we study an Arthurian or Grail romance, or consider a heroic epic, we regularly discover specific poetic comments about the political relationships between the king and his subjects, between husband and wife, between a lord and his peasants, and hence among all people. What is more often at stake than we might have assumed proves to be the fundamental concern with justice, individual freedom, and personal rights, and this already in the Middle Ages.

Of course, in most cases, the aristocratic protagonists operate within their own circles and do not specifically interact with the rural population or the poor, who certainly existed then. But it proves to be quite eye-opening to hear of how much the various narrators voice criticism, formulate warnings, provide guidance, and address the individual's shortcomings. Very commonly, as to be expected, poets outlined in clear terms the dangers if a person tries to leave his or her class behind and rise on the social ladder, which then leads to catastrophic consequences, both for the old and the new class, as we learn about it most clearly in Wernher the Gardener's Helmbrecht (ca. 1260/1270) [24-25].

In this verse novella, the young protagonist wants to leave the peasant class behind and quickly gain riches and social esteem, which becomes a temporary reality for him because he turns into nothing but a robber knight. Eventually, however, after he has transformed into a primitive and ruthless criminal attacking the members of his old rural community and hurting them in many different fashions, he and his fellows are apprehended by a judge and his servants. All the others are executed on the spot, whereas Helmbrecht is spared to some extent. He 'only' loses his right arm, his left leg, and his two eyes to make it impossible for him ever to sit on a horse and fight with a sword. For a whole year he wanders around, virtually helpless, only guided by a child, when peasants who had suffered from him badly apprehend him and lynch him without any mercy.

Justice has been done, as the poet presents, who combines this outcome with a clear warning about anyone who might consider rising above his/her own social status by means of criminal activities. With his death, peace rules once again: "ûf den strâzen und ûf den wegen / was diu wagenvart gelegen / die varent alle nû mit frîde" [26-27].

Many poets, deeply influenced by the teachings of the Church, reflected on the moral and ethical ideals of a Christian life, bemoaning, for instance, the dangers of the Seven Deadly Sins. The ills in human life found countless expressions, combined with poetic warnings about the consequences, such as in William Langland's Piers the Plowman [28]. Famous Dante Alighieri was probably the most forceful poet to offer clear criticism of the whole gamut of human sinfulness when he composed his Divina Commedia, completed around 1320, that is, especially his Inferno [29-30].

Social criticism, however, lamentations about the dangers of an abusive and vicious aristocracy that threatened the well-being of the larger section of the population, can be identified most explicitly primarily in Marie de France's Fables, titled Ysopë. We would not assess her work correctly if we tried to read those short verse narratives as prescripts for a revolutionary approach in transforming her aristocratic society. She was not, and could not be, a democratically minded poet; to expect anything else would be anachronistic. However, a close reading of her animal stories in verse will clearly demonstrate the extent to which already medieval writers commanded a strong sense of justice, the need for individual freedom, morality, and, to some extent, even democracy [31].

2. A Female Voice in the Political Arena

In many ways, Marie de France deserves great respect as a poet – we do not really know much about her personal life. She composed works in a variety of genres, lais, fables, and hagiography. She demonstrates in her various prologues that she must have received a solid education and might have known Latin as well. At the same time, she was deeply familiar with the ancient oral traditions in Brittany, since she drew from those for her lais. She indicates her close relationship with the English King Henry II, but otherwise, her identity remains obscure. Drawing from the old Aesopian tradition of fable writing, she connected herself with a famous literary tradition, but she then also moved somewhat away from it and created her own versions to some extent.

Although Marie engaged also with the phenomenon of courtly love, in most of her lais she rather idealized mar-

ital love while objecting to arranged marriages, especially when old and wealthy men basically 'bought' their picture brides, which then created deep unhappiness ("Guigemar," "Milun," etc.) [32]. But already in her lais, she turned her attention to political problems, such as in "Equitan," where the king neglects his responsibilities, puts aside his own ethical standards, and submits himself under the will of his beloved, the steward's wife. She goes so far as to conceive of a devious plan to murder her husband, but both lovers are exposed by him in the last minute, so the steward can turn the table and kill them instead. In "Eliduc," the protagonist serves his king and proves to be one of his most loyal knights, but slander moves the king to expel Eliduc, who then moves to England and offers his help to another king. The love affair which then results does not need to be considered here, whereas the first king's waffling and instability sheds a bad light on him as a ruler.

Only when we consider the fables, however, does Marie reveal her full force of social criticism because she utilizes the ancient tradition to reflect on contemporary ills and trouble – certainly a strategy which virtually all fable authors have pursued. Even though we would thus have to acknowledge that her animal allegories were hardly innovative, disregarding smaller differences in individual cases, we can certainly observe how much she succeeded in addressing universal concerns about justice, freedom, and social harmony.

If our analysis can confirm that, we would have once again solid evidence that medieval philosophy and social commentary can easily communicate with our own concerns today. In other words, Marie's fables might well be a valuable steppingstone that took us to the current debates about those fundamental ideals that make human society worth living in. Kinoshita and McCracken note that throughout Marie's collection, "bad lords are the rule, wielding a brute power unattenuated by the bonds of mutual obligation. The powerful routinely victimize the weak to their own advantage [17]. Although there is a strong consensus that the poet mirrored the social structure of her time as something God-given which ought not to be undermined or overthrown, this does not mean at all that she would have supported the system in place, especially because, in Spiegel's terms, "Marie also brings a new sensitivity to these fables and a strong sympathy for the poor and powerless characters" [33]. What might this sensitivity be all about? Was this poet affirming the political tradition, or was she more forward looking? Of course, these fables address, as all fables from throughout time do, human vices and virtues [34]. But can we detect more than simple moralizing and literary entertainment in Marie's fables [35]?

In fact, as the Prologue confirms, Marie aimed for fundamental insights, calling people to observe or pursue morals, wisdom, and the pursuit of knowledge. To this she added gentility and courtesy, hence aiming for a complete transformation of the individual from a crude and uneducated member of society to a cultured, well-mannered, polite, and respectful personality. There was, however, as she noticed, a lot of injustice, as the second fable indicates, where a wolf uses a flimsy and actually completely wrong excuse to kill a lamb. The wolf represents the great lords, whereas the lamb stands for the common folks who are victimized by the former and cannot defend themselves against their false charges. The wolf simply wants to take the lamb as his prey and resorts to a fake charge, erroneous claiming that the lamb, drinking from the river downstream would soil the water for the wolf who is located upstream. Logic and reason do not matter in this case, and when the lamb tries to defend itself, pointing out the absurdity of the false claim, the wolf double down on it, reminding the poor lamb of its father who had argued in the very same fashion of self-defense and who then had been punished with the death penalty. The rhetoric employed is simply twisted, and the wolf only pretends to observe the system of laws. It's only interest consists of getting the lamb for its dinner, so the young innocent creature becomes a victim of this dangerous and yet foolish speaker, the powerful wolf.

The poet then turns around and points out that the "viscounts and the judges too" (v. 32) perform in exactly the same way as the wolf and should be treated as criminals. Instead of observing the laws and their ethical principles, they transgress those badly and take horrible advantage of their authority to the severe disadvantage of the poor people. The lamb would never have a chance of getting a fair and just treatment; the greedy wolf only pretends to listen to the counterargument, and it quickly shifts the argument to punish the lamb for the 'evil' deed committed by its father. Tragically for us today, the strategy employed

here by the wolf seems to be an essential tool in his playbook by which he can guarantee victory at any cost. We know of this strategy only too well in our current political climate where truth is no longer of value, where shifting charges without any validity and lawfulness serve to overwhelm the opponent, and where greed and pride combine in an unholy alliance which makes the leader of the pack so attractive to all other criminally-minded individuals that they follow his/her lead and are rewarded with major posts in the government without having any qualifications.

In Marie's case, the wolf simply takes the lamb, kills it, and devours it, which closes any question regarding the rightfulness of this action. Undoubtedly, in the epimythium, the poet raises her voice against the presumptuous lords within her society and criticizes them for being criminally minded: "False charge they make from greed so cruel" (34). Whereas the lamb had resorted to rationality and reason, the wolf, not hesitating one moment, relied on the usual method of creating confusion by means of a shifting argumentation which leaves the poor victim speechless in face of such callousness. But since the lamb provides food for the wolf, and since the ordinary people are easy victims/targets of the aristocrats who rob them of their resources for their own purposes, justice is denied, freedom and fairness are rejected, and the powerful one rules. If I wanted to make a political claim, I would refer to the current situation in the USA or in Turkey, but for this I would have to turn to a scholar of political science to handle this parallel in a solid scholarly fashion.

Whereas the second fable sharply attacks the misdeeds by the lords, the third fable with the mouse and the frog targets the evilness in ordinary people. The frog visits the mouse in its comfortable house but convinces it that the frog's abode would be much more pleasant, although the watery world of a swamp would be very inappropriate for the mouse. Crossing a body of water constitutes an impossibility for the mouse, but the frog convinces the mouse to tie itself to the new 'friend.' However, as it then becomes clear, "the frog intended mouse to drown" (69), although we are not informed about the motive behind this evil performance. But the mouse is rescued because its loud commotion to stay alive awakens a kite's attention who comes swooping down and swallows the frog, which is a fatter prey than the mouse.

Marie severely criticizes "feluns" (83), that is, evil people who cannot be trusted and who do nothing but hurt others without any particular reasons. Those, however, at least according to the outcome of this fable, are then punished at the end, which creates a sense of justice, just as in the case of Wernher's Helmbrecht. The poet concludes with this epimythium: "These folks who torment in this way / And think that others they'll ensnare, will / Find that they place themselves in peril" (90–92). Of course, this seems to be just a hopeful statement without any solid evidence in reality. But Marie highlights with this fable that there are many cunning and evil people whom no one should trust. She does not analyze the reasons for the murderous intentions by the mouse and emphasizes only that evil will devour itself and thus can be overcome. But there is also a very specific warning to the audience not to trust cunning people's false flattery and deception. The mouse has no reason to leave its own safe and comfortable place, and yet, "flattery went to her head" (45).

The allure of the frog's promises make the mouse disregard its own critical assessment of its conditions at the mill, so it trusts a false friend and would almost have drowned or have been eaten by the kite: "Against the mouse's will, she pressed her / She urged her onward, praised her so" (54–55). In fact, the mouse is just lucky to survive both the frog's evil cunning and the attack by the kite, which implies, according to Marie, that the individual needs to look out for his/her own well-being, avoid greed, not to trust false friends, and to operate by means of rationality and a realistic assessment of one's own resources, abilities, and skills. After all, for the frog, a wet territory and then a body of water prove to be the ideal conditions, but those are detrimental to the mouse. In short, the individual ought to learn how to comprehend the own means, limits, and social context; mingling with untrustworthy characters could lead to one's death.

When we turn to the fourth fable, we find ourselves in the context of law and the court of justice. Of course, already then, medieval society was determined by a legal system, as unstable or incomplete it might have been. A dog takes a ewe to court claiming that it had lent a loaf of bread which the other one had never returned. This is an outright lie, but since the dog brings in two corrupt witnesses, who simply confirm the dog's untruth, the poor

ewe is helpless and is not only tried by the judge but has to give up its life because those witnesses only cared about their payments and not at all about truth. Marie provides a direct explanation of their corruption: "Each one was waiting for his share, / If death should be her sentence there" (27–28). Although the judge dangles the hope to the ewe to get off the hook by simply returning the loaf, but the poor animal does not have any and is thus condemned to death.

The poet sharply criticizes the failure of the legal system, and in particular the lack of virtues and morality on the side of the false witnesses. Even though Marie does not identify more specifically whom she challenges with her poetic criticism, she still formulates clearly enough that money rules even the courts: "What's left the poor? The rich don't care, / As long as they all get their share" (41–42). This bitter complaint would not have been possible if Marie had not been aware of the basic concepts of justice and lawfulness within her society. But the fable indicates that traditional values and ideals have fallen by the wayside and are no longer upheld, not even by the judges. "Lies and trickery" (37; "mentir e par tricher") have become ubiquitous, so justice is gravely at stake of being lost. Even though the judge continues to follow the rules, calling for witnesses to back up the dog's charges, he does not have any means in hand, or any willingness to question those witnesses and thus to uphold truth. Sadly enough for us, the moral of this fable can be easily applied to our modern world, and this in the twenty-first century, when we hear of endless appeals, counter-charges, new appeals, stacking of the legal courts, and thus increasingly face the reality that even judges have become corrupt [36-38].

Admittedly, the poet does not say much about freedom or even democracy, but she implies undoubtedly that she expects a legal system to be in place, that she warns of extensive corruption, and argues that individuals, irrespective of their social status, ought to enjoy freely their privileges. Marie does not criticize the social structure she is an integral part of, but she voices her deep concerns about internal weaknesses brought about by human vices and character weaknesses. The frog in the previous fable, for instance, has no reason to be so hostile to the mouse and simply seems to enjoy its power to kill another living being. The dog in the next and the wolf in the second fable are driven by their greed, even though, as animals, it makes sense that they need a prey to still their hunger. However, all these animals represent human characters, and the dog's reliance on false witnesses reveals the essential message of this text, to warn against the danger of corruption in the judicial process. The targets of Marie's criticism are individuals with a poor character who hence endanger the entire system. If their sinfulness could be eliminated, then all people could enjoy their own lives with a relative degree of freedom.

To be sure, the poet has also explicit political comments about evil rulers, such as in the sixth fable where the sun wants to get a spouse and needs to ask for Destiny's permission. In a large council of all creatures, the wisest person among them points out the significant danger to everyone if the sun would shine during the summer with double heat and make the earth to parch and destroy life at large: "A partner sharing his desires, / We'll not be able to survive" (18–19). More details about the outcome of the negotiations are not provided, except that Destiny denies the son's request, and instead Marie concludes with global comments on the danger of the political process if it were to grant superior or excessive power to the sovereign.

An evil ruler would threaten the well-being of all subjects: "Their lord must not grow mightier" (27). Granting him more influence and authority than appropriate, would lead to a fast decline of society at large, to the loss of freedom – that term itself is not used here – and to the endangerment of the individuals: "Stronger the lord, the worse their fate: / His ambush always lies in wait" (31–32). In short, the ruler/king is specifically regarded with considerable suspicion because he could easily assume excessive authority and cause enormous damage to everyone in the country, especially those who might resist the tyrannical king.

The implications of this fable are quite obvious. Even though Marie does not question the role and rank of a king as such, she is rather apprehensive of the danger that he might turn into a tyrant, as the case of King Henry II appeared to have been against whom John of Salisbury argued so vehemently [39-42]. Even though the conclusion does not spell out exactly what political position the poet embraced, there is no doubt as to her warning about the danger of extreme power accumulation in the hand of a king, or an individual lord: "Stronger the, the worse their fate"

(31). Similarly, the poet concludes the next fable dealing with the wolf and the crane, the latter having pulled out a bone from the former's throat without getting any reward from the wolf. Quickly correlating both animals with those individuals who wield the most power, Marie comments: "With wicket lords it is this way: / A poor man his respects will pay / And then he'll ask for his reward. / He'll never get that from his lord! / Yet unto him the poor must give / Thanks that their lord has let them live" (33–38).

Of course, she does not have in mind any major changes in the power structure. Lords remain lords, kings remain kings, and the ordinary citizens stay what they are. But the poet severely chastises those who are in an authoritative position and abuse that because they do not know of or simply ignore the ethical principles their offices are defined by. In this regard, these fables tend more toward moralizing than toward a political discourse, even though Marie certainly criticizes evil lords and the king as well when it seems appropriate to her. That means, political power is not the same as true political authority which comes along with a high degree of moral self-discipline and a strong sense of social responsibilities and obligations.

However, as Marie emphasizes repeatedly, the king tends to take all and everything for himself and does not leave anything of the prey for the other animals, or its servants, as we read, for instance, in the fourteenth fable of the lion, the buffalo, and the wolf. Although the latter two hunt down and kill a deer, the king takes the prey all for itself and thereby destroys the love and loyalty which his closest servants should owe it. The poet returns to the same issue in fable 11B where the lion takes all the prey although the sheep and the goat had helped him to hunt and kill the deer. Obviously trying to tread more softly, the poet does not target the king so much as she rather highlights the universal tensions between the rich and the poor, the former always claiming all the glory for himself even if he might lose the love of his poor friends. "If there is gain to be divided, / The rich man keeps all, that's decided" (47–48).

However, even the most powerful king would face one day the same destiny as everyone else, growing old and feeble, which then would lead to his loss of authority and fame because "He has few friends who is not strong" (no. 14, 32). In other words, a tyrant might be able to exert his influence for some time, but old age would certainly sap his strength and hence would deprive him of his power. According to Marie, then, the toll of time would bring to an end even the worst ruler, an insight which serves as a direct message to the king or any other lord to remember the human limitations. Similarly, the famous fable about the lion and the mouse suggests that the rich and mighty ones should never forget the important role played by the poor and weak subjects who could become crucially important for them under specific circumstances. Despite the considerable power differentials, each person plays, as Marie argues forcefully, his/her own important role within society: "The rich may need the poor man who / Can better tell him what to do / When he's by sudden need hard pressed, / Than can his friends, even the best" (no. 16, 31–34). In other words, the poet calls for mutual assistance, for a collaborative feudalistic society with firm classes and social ranks, but each person should understand his/her political obligations and responsibilities.

But a constructive social community also depended on the respect which the subjects would pay to the king, as the fable of the frogs who asked for a king (no. 18) indicates. Destiny ridicules the frogs after they have complained about the wooden log serving as their new king, doing nothing letting them all sitting on it until it sank to the ground. Once Destiny has replaced the log with an adder that starts eating up the frogs, the latter complain again and yet are then told that they had dishonored their king: "His honour they don't know to guard. / If they're not kept in stressful plight, / The'll do him neither wrong nor right" (48–50). In other words, Marie argues for a balanced relationship within the monarchy where the king needs to pay respect to the subjects, while the latter would be required to support and guard the king's honor.

Surprisingly, as fable no. 19 indicates, people would have the freedom to select their own king and hence should hence pay close attention to whom they might pick. In this case, doves foolishly choose a hawk who from then on eats each one of the doves who approaches it. They bitterly complain about this horrible situation, but the poet points out that a king is not simply empowered to assume the throne; instead, Marie indicates that a sovereign is elected, or at least chosen by a small elite group. If this king then turns out to be evil, then the people would deserve to be blamed for this bad outcome: "That man indeed acts like a

fool / Who puts himself under the rule / Of one who's cruel and villainous: / Nothing but shame will come from this" (23–26).

Several conclusions can be drawn from this fable. First, people have a choice among various individuals as the potential king. Second, a king is necessary under any circumstances. Third, once a candidate has been selected and he turns out to be an evil character, then the people are to be blamed for this outcome. Fourth, a king does not operate automatically as a good leader of his people. And fifth, there emerges a certain degree of freedom in selecting a king, and this forces the people to be very discriminatory before they make the wrong selection. Of course, this does not mean that Marie truly reflected political reality, but she used this fable to outline a rather complex election system which was based on a careful balancing act involving both the future king and the people.

This also finds its expression, though rather loosely, in the twenty-fourth fable where a stag is deeply enamored with its antlers and realizes only too late that they will be responsible for it to be caught by the hunters and their dogs because the antlers make the animal get stuck in the underbrush of the forest. Marie here formulates the noteworthy concept that people ought to be critical of what they deem most beautiful and not become victims of their self-illusion (21–24). This could be considered in direct analogy to the political situation when the people too easily adore an individual who pretends to be a glamorous king but ultimately might turn out to be an evil tyrant. Power is not simply an absolute entity, as this fable indicates, but a construction that depends on smart decisions and a careful assessment of the political conditions.

Intriguingly, Marie also entertained a specific notion of freedom, and this almost in modern terms, so when a wolf encounters a dog and admires its shiny appearance, which is the result of its master's good treatment and rich food. In fact, the dog seems to enjoy a very pleasant life: "While resting at my master's feet / Where daily I gnaw bones, and that / Is what makes me so big and fat" (no. 26, 10–12). The wolf thinks that this is all so admirable and attractive that it wants to join the service. However, then it notices the collar around the dog's neck, along with a chain, with which its master ties him up tightly during the week to protect his possessions which the dog would otherwise chew on and destroy. Only at night the dog is allowed to walk around and must be on guard against thieves.

The wolf then realizes that the dog is not free at all and can leave the house only when its master takes it for a walk. In horror, the wolf cries out: "I'll never choose to wear a chain! / I'd rather live as a wolf, free, / Than on a chain in luxury" (36–38). As it then pronounces, it is still free to make its own choices, so it departs from the dog and returns home in the wilderness where freedom awaits it: "Par la chaêne est dapartie" (41; "A chain thus brought the termination").

A medieval king was certainly not an absolute ruler; instead, he depended on his barons, his military esteem, his financial resources, and on the will of the people at least to some extent. A king could resign, a new one could be elected, and then the question would immediately emerge who could replace the previous ruler and what character qualities would be required of him. All these aspects come clearly to the surface in the twenty-ninth fable where the old lion king decides to step down and move away in his old age. In a convocation, all animals vote for the wolf as the strongest among them, "Though all thought wolf a villain grim" (16). However, he swears an oath to treat them to the best of his abilities ("amereit tutdis," 18). The old king voices concern about this selection because the wolf would pick the fox as his counsellor, who is well known for his trickery and deception. To create a safeguard against the potentiality of the wolf betraying and hurting them all, they make him swear on relics "That he'd touch no beast anywhere" (32).

Yet, nothing is of avail, the wolf desires to eat meat and orders a roe deer to appear before him, forcing it to tell the truth about its own breath. The deer is honest and reveals what they all know but do not admit publicly: "It was almost unbearable" (48). This infuriates the wolf so much that he has the poor deer arrested, tried, and condemned to death, and this with the full approval of his entire court (55). When the wolf is hungry again, it calls in another animal that then lies openly: "she knew o scent / So fragrant and so excellent" (67–68). Again, the court is assembled, and they all confirm that the liar deserves its death. Next, the wolf wants to devour a fat monkey and asks the same question, to which the poor animal answers that it would not know. This leaves the wolf at a conundrum, so it pre-

tends to be severely ill, although the doctors cannot find any symptoms. Finally, he affirms that it needs monkey meat to get well again, which then happens.

The narrator then concludes with the mournful insight, "His oath to none of them was fast" (114). This ruler is thus identified as ruthless, voracious, cruel, insidious, reckless, and brutal, thinking only of its own nourishment and disregarding all its oaths. Of course, on the surface of things, the wolf king follows the laws, in reality, however, it brutalizes and murders anyone in its way or whoever appears as welcome prey. For Marie, the message is thus loud and clear: "A wicked man e'er make seignior, / Nor show to such a one honour" (117–118). An evil ruler cannot be trusted, he would not observe any loyalty or honor, oaths or promises, attacking and killing both foreigners and his own people: "With strangers as with his close friends. / And toward his people he will act / As did the wolf, with his sworn pact" (120–122).

3. Conclusions

There are many other fables from Marie's pen that would allow us to investigate her political, ethical, moral, and religious values and ideals. Overall, there is clear evidence that she harbored grave misgivings about evil kings, corrupt lords, deceptive judges, and villains serving as the king's councillors. In fact, she was, as we can conclude, very apprehensive of political corruption as she observed it in many corners of her society. Greed, pride, gluttony, and other vices could easily destroy a king's or any other ruler's character, and once that was lost, the entire country was at risk of falling apart because the commonly shared values were no longer in place. Particularly the last fable provides most detailed comments about the dangers when an evil individual is chosen as the new king.

What Marie describes in her fables finds direct parallels in the political reality even today. When a king rules with violence, injustice, lack of respect, when he creates fear amongst his subjects, and destroys those who still dare to tell him the truth, then the foundation of dictatorship has been established threatening the well-being of everyone else. In many ways, we could utilize Marie's verse narratives as highly instructive literary texts that shed light not only on her own society, but, alas, on our own as well, whether we live in a democracy or in a pretense liberal world, however structured. The tendency to create a dictatorship has always been with us in history, and we are hence well advised to pay close attention to past voices such as by Marie de France to guard ourselves from the horrendous consequences when the democratic principles are abandoned in favor of personal tyranny. I venture, at least from a personal perspective, to claim that Marie's Fables prove to be more topical today than we might have ever expected, if we consider the situation in many western countries in the twenty-first century.

Of course, irrespective of the specific political conditions in any country, the warnings pronounced by Marie prove to be timeless and relevant for everyone who might have any concern about the well-being of the own society and its politics. Even though the poet did not question the basic structure of feudalism and monarchy, she voiced serious questions about the ethical and political concepts behind them. If an individual would betray those, then society would suffer quickly, with no one really profiting from the changes in the system except those whom Marie identified as corrupt and criminal. Tragically, not much seems to have changed in that regard until today, considering the constant threats to the constitution, the democratic principles, the people's representation, and the common abuse of the political, military, and economic power wielded by a dictatorial king.

Marie does not develop a cohesive political argument and instead works with individual cases in each one of her fables. But there is a consistent warning about the evils of a corrupt king and his government. It would be absurd to claim that she might have foreseen the many conflicts our present generation is going through, but we can certainly argue that the fables as collected and translated by Marie serve as excellent literary narratives to examine the dangers of a failed political system where individuals grab power and repress all others. Death of the innocent, wise, and intellectual threatens, as was the case in Nazi Germany, as is the case in Putin's Russia, and can be observed in Shiite Iran today. Liars, thieves, murderers, deceivers, and outright fools have always been around, more than we could even handle in a fair and just society. As the fables teach us, criminals are a threat to the entire world, and those who resort to violence to achieve their personal goals undermine all the basic bonds holding a society together,

unless that society can rally enough strength to fight the evil ones and hold them at bay. Conflicts, hostilities, jealousy and envy, combined with fear, foolishness, and ignorance, tend to be the constant currents in human society, both in Marie's time and today.

The poet did not only outline severe threats by evil rulers; she also reflected on many opportunities individuals would have to defend themselves against a tyrant. In the thirty-third fable, for example, a butcher takes one sheep a day and kills it, but the animals refuse to defend themselves until only one of them is still alive. In light of this miserable situation, Marie offers this advice: "Many get hurt by their submission; / They dare not enemies defy / Lest they'd fare even worse thereby" (26–28). The outcome is, of course, terrible, but the conclusion offered is valuable and far-reaching. The true strength rests in numbers, and even the worst dictator would have to submit under the will of the people if those would hold together. This is exactly the same message as formulated by Marie's near-contemporary, the Austrian-Bavarian Der Stricker who in one of his verse narratives, "Der Riese" (ca. 1220) presents almost the same situation except that a giant eats up one person at a time of a company of twelve. He always asks for just one of them, and the group sacrifices the weakest among them. When only one person is left and wants to fight, the giant simply points out that this is too late, whereas they all as a collective would have had a chance against him [43].

Altogether, as we can now confirm, both in light of Marie de France's fables and of many other contemporary secular and didactic texts, already the high Middle Ages were familiar with and dedicated to the discourse on justice, fair government, and a certain degree of individual freedom. Of course, it would take hundreds of years for these arguments to reach critical mass for modern democracy to emerge. However, as our analysis has unearthed, the roots of that discourse can be traced already in the vernacular literatures of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, here not even considering the many valuable contributions by philosophers and theologians.

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