

Metamorphosis and Return in the Lays of Bisclavret and Melion

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Marie de France's Bisclavret and the lesser-known lay of Melion are two medieval stories among the dozen or so popular during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that address the metamorphosis of man to wolf. In both poems a young knight who is highly regarded by his king and peers marries a beautiful lady of quality. The lady, after swearing her undying love for him, betrays him, purposefully leaving her husband in the state of a werewolf. The hero is condemned to live the life of a beast for quite some time, but is then able to seek his recovery following a fortuitous encounter with the king, who marvels at the animal's human-like qualities. In the king's presence the wolf confronts those who have betrayed him and the intrigue unravels. The guilty confess and the wolf is finally returned to human form.

The creator of Melion is unknown, but it is thought that he was a professional jongleur of Picard origin who possessed a wide-ranging knowledge of the stories circulating during his time. According to P. M. O'Hara Tobin, the most recent editor of the Melion text, included in Les Lais anonymes des XIIe et XIIIe siècle,¹ this storyteller was probably familiar with the works of Wace, Chrétien de Troyes, the Tractatus de Amore by André le Chapelain, as well as the Breton lays of Marie de France. The lay of Melion and the lay of Bisclavret are fairly contemporary. In her critical edition Tobin places its composition between 1170 and 1267, more narrowly, between the years 1190 and 1204 (292).² Most editors of the works of Marie de France agree that her Lais were

set down during the last one-third of the twelfth century, with the date of 1170 often being mentioned.³

Over the years scholars have questioned the origin of Melion, debating whether it is an adaptation of Bisclavret or an independent version. Some early critics such as L. Foulet and E. Hoepffner hold the Melion story to be nothing more than a poor quality imitation of Marie de France's Bisclavret. (Tobin, note 294). However, a premise advanced by Kittredge and later supported by scholars like Grimes, Ménard, and Tobin, suggests that the two lays are independent redactions of the same saga.⁴ In this essay I will argue that despite similarities in the story line, textual analysis reveals substantial differences in the treatment of the transformation and return of the protagonists that lend credence to the hypothesis that both stories drew on a common source,⁵ rather than the one being an alteration of the other.

The initial situation in the two accounts is the same: a wife's wish to rid herself of her husband sets the story in motion. In the Bisclavret tale the betrayal is, to some extent, understandable. The wife has just learned from her husband that he becomes a beast on a regular basis. His shocking avowal fills her with feelings of fear and revulsion and prompts her to rekindle a relationship with a former admirer to whom she soon reveals the secret location of her husband's discarded clothing. In the Melion story, the treachery is more enigmatic. The future wife, reminiscent of the fairy mistress, appears suddenly and without a retinue at the scene of a hunt where Melion and his foresters are pursuing a stag. She announces that she is of high rank and noble lineage and has come from Ireland to be his bride. After three years of marital bliss, and at the moment of another chase, she abandons her husband, who, as a result of her machinations, is now in

wolf form, and speedily departs for her homeland, taking Melion's squire with her. It is never made clear whether the squire is a lover or simply an accomplice.

In both of these narratives the knight / wolf passes through four distinct phases: the transformation from man to wolf, the life of a beast in the forest, the recovery stage where the wolf gains the king's protection, and finally the wolf's return to human form. The lay of Melion and the lay of Bisclavret are the most analogous in phase three, the wolf at court segment. In the fourth stage, the stories share the same physical environment, the locked room. Let us examine each of these segments in detail.

Melion's transformation to a wolf is chiefly dependant upon a white stone in a magic ring, although there is the secondary requirement that the ring be put to his head while he is nude. The ring with its dual stones, and his garments, must be retained in order to make possible his return to man. There is an impetus leading to the change. During a hunting expedition, Melion, attended by his squire and his wife, points out a stag in the bushes. His wife unexpectedly declares that she will never eat again if she cannot partake of the flesh of this deer and falls off her palfrey in a swoon. This response prompts Melion to reveal the supernatural powers of his ring. He asks his wife to stay and protect his belongings while he, in the form of a predatory animal, tracks the stag. Putting his life in her hands, he voluntarily transforms himself in order to satisfy her unusual demand.

Por Deu, vos pri, ci m'atendés,
Et ma despoille me gardés
Jo vos lais ma vie et ma mort;
Il n'i avroit nul reconfort,
Se de l'autre touciés n'estoie;
Jamais nul jor hom ne seroie.
(167-172)

I beg you in God's name, wait for me here,
And guard my cast-off clothing
I trust you with my life and my death;
There would be no consolation
If I were not touched by the other (stone);
I would never be a man again.

Melion possesses the knowledge and the means to effect the man-to-wolf change at will. As Margaret Grimes affirms in her edition of the texts, The Lays of Desiré, Graelent and Melion, Melion's ability to transform himself into a beast is "a gift of which he was proud. (33)."

Bisclavret's transformation, a weekly shift, seems to be an innate behavior, but no specific explanation of it is offered. His metamorphosis involves no magic accessories. As in the traditional werewolf tales, he simply removes and hides his clothing. The repossession of the cast-off garments is the prerequisite for his return to man, as he discloses in response to his wife's query, "Di mei, pur Deu, u sunt voz dras (71)" "Tell me, in Heaven's name, where your clothes are."

'Dame,' fet il, 'ceo ne dirai jeo pas;
Kar si jes eüsse perduz
E de ceo feusse aparceüz,
Bisclavret sereie a toz jurs:
(72-75)

Lady, he said, I will not tell you
Because if I were to lose them
And this were found out,
I would remain a werewolf forever

Although Bisclavret becomes a *garualf* on a regular basis, we are given no details about the change and very little information regarding his subsequent bestial activities. He claims to subsist on prey and rapine during the three days a week he lives in the thicket, but no graphic evidence of these actions is presented. On the contrary, he has reportedly just returned home from one of his outings "happy and gay" "joius e liez (30)" at the moment his spouse summons the courage to question him about his frequent absences. Later, after his duplicitous wife's male friend removes Bisclavret's clothing from its cache, he is forced to remain in the woods for the period of one year, but what he does during his seclusion is left to the imagination of the reader.

The portrayal of Melion's life in the wild is quite different. During the time that he is excluded from human society he assumes the identity of a savage beast and fully integrates himself into the animal world. Immediately upon his conversion he slays the stag and returns with a portion of its flesh. The meat, intended for his wife, ends up providing sustenance for the wolf, who goes in search of her. Famished and suffering from the sea, he consumes the venison following his flight from the ship that he boarded as a stowaway. Once in Ireland Melion continues to provide for his needs by butchering livestock, "molt en ocit et estrangla (255)" "many of them he strangled and killed," and then by becoming the leader of a pack of wolves that takes peoples' lives and ravages the countryside.

Tot le país ont degasté,
Homes et femes ocïoient,
Tote la terre destruoient,
(276-78)

The entire country was devastated
They killed men and women
All the land was destroyed

While in the lone wolf stage Melion maintains his human ability to reason, "se leus estoit, Sens et memoire d'one avoit (217)" "if wolf he were, the intelligence and memory of a man he had." His intelligence, or "engien," (322) enables him to outwit a hunting party organized by his wife's father, the king, but this leaves him as the sole survivor of the wolf pack. Saddened by the loss of his wolves, Melion reasons that his survival depends upon making contact with King Arthur. Knowing that his animal shape and inability to speak create a great communication barrier, he determines that he must even risk death in order to obtain an audience with the king.

We now enter the third stage. As stated earlier, it is in this phase, the time when the wolves begin their reintegration into the world of men, where the resemblances

between the two narratives are the most striking. Both the wolf Melion and the wolf Bisclavret approach the king while he is in an outlying area. In the Marie de France tale, the king is hunting in the forest, whereas in the story of Melion, Arthur is sojourning in an uninhabited castle two leagues outside of Dublin. At each encounter the king is struck by the animal's rational, human-like characteristics and considers him to be something quite out of the ordinary, or "desnaturés."

"Seignurs," fet il, 'avant venez!
Ceste merveillë esgardez,
Cum ceste beste se humilie!
Ele ad sen de hume, merci crie.

(151-154 Bisclavret)

Ce dist li rois: "Merveilles voi:
Cis leus est ci venus a moi.
Or sachiés bien qu'il est privés,
Mar ert touchiés ne adesés.

(409-412 Melion)

Lords, he said, come forward!
Look at this astonishing thing,
How this beast humbles himself!
He has the intelligence of a man, begs
mercy.

The king said, I see an astonishing thing:
This wolf has come here to me.
Know that he is my familiar
Woe be to the one who touches him.

Both beasts manifest another human attribute, civility. Bisclavret is "debonair," and never wants to do any harm. Melion, the "courtly wolf" eats bread and meat from the king's hand, and drinks wine from a basin when it is offered. Both are loyal, following the sovereign wherever he goes, even sleeping at his feet. A strong attachment soon develops between man and animal. The reputation that the wolf establishes with the king and members of the court stands him in good stead for upcoming trials. Each of the beasts soon commits violent acts against humans. Melion attacks his former squire and Bisclavret assaults not only his wife's new husband, but also the woman herself.

In the *Bisclavret* story, there is much surprise among the peers when the wolf aggresses the knight, “Mut s’esmerveillent li plusur (204)” “Many were filled with astonishment,” but excuses are made for him. All proclaim that he would not do it without cause. The narrator, Marie, interjects a comment at this point, saying, “N’est merveille s’il le haï (218)” “it’s no wonder that he (wolf) hates him (knight).” She then sets the scene for the awaited confrontation with the wife by announcing, “Oiez cum il est bien vengiez!” (234) “Hear how well he avenged himself!” *Bisclavret*, by assaulting his wife and ripping off her nose in a fit of rage destines the woman and her female descendants from this moment on to carry “the mark of the beast.”⁶ In contrast, *Melion*, who commits many savage acts while running with the wolves, is back in a civilized condition by the time he encounters his wife, and thus does not react in a physically violent manner toward her. He becomes agitated, but the knight of the court responds to the rational advice of his peers.

Counselors who advise the king following the vicious incidents are a common motif in both stories.⁷ An unnamed wise man comes to the defense of the beast in the lay of *Bisclavret*. Recognizing the disfigured woman as being the former wife of the king’s much-loved knight, he voices the widely held opinion that the beast living serenely among them must have something against this woman and her lord. The *prud’homme* suggests putting her in distress to see what she knows. In the lay of *Melion*, Ydel plays the role of the wolf’s defender and advisor to the king. At Ydel’s urging Arthur pressures the squire into recounting the story of the deception, an action that leads to the recovery of the ring. In *Bisclavret* the wise man later offers further advice. Shortly before the return-to-man segment he insists that the wolf / knight be given some privacy so that he

may avoid the embarrassment of redressing and becoming a man in public. Gauvain furnishes his uncle, King Arthur, with similar counsel in Melion.

The wolf-to-man transformation for both characters takes place in a private room. In the lay of Melion, the reader is privy to the course of the action. King Arthur, Gauvain, and Ydel are present and are said to be happy upon seeing Melion. The reversal consists of several steps: the red stone in the ring is put to the wolf's head, his face changes, he becomes a man, and then he speaks, the ultimate proof of his return to humanity.

L'anel li a sor le chief mis,
D'ome li aparut le vis,
Tote sa figure mua;
Lors devint hom, et si parla
(547-550)

He (the king) placed the ring on his head,
The face of a man appeared,
His entire form changed,
He then became a man and spoke

Melion falls to the feet of the king and is first covered with a cloak, then, before being led out into the hall and presented to the others, he is appropriately dressed in fine garments fetched by the king's chamberlain. His own clothing is apparently no longer necessary. By putting more importance on the power of the ring than on the recovery of the original garments, the author of the Melion story diverges somewhat from traditional werewolf rites. The potency ascribed to the magic stones in the ring seems to be something of his own invention. Ménard tells us that to his knowledge, medieval lapidaries did not attribute to any gem the ability to change man into wolf (221).⁸

In the Bisclavret account we are given no insight into the metamorphosis. The procedure occurs behind closed doors. Bisclavret has put on his discarded garments, thus bringing about the return to human form, prior to the entrance of the king and his two

barons. Bearing the name “speaking wolf,”⁹ (Ewert, 172) the central character does not speak again after the transformation, although we assume that he surely regained this function.

As we have seen, in the lay of Bisclavret the poetess presents the reader with only a cursory account of the conversion and of the wolf’s life in the wild. In her recitation Marie recognizes the possibility of the change from man to wolf, saying in the prologue, “Jadis . . . Humes plusurs garual devindrent (7)” “Formerly . . . many men became werewolves,” but she is reluctant to give a description of it. And while acknowledging the malevolent nature of werewolves, “Hummes devure, grant mal fait (9)” “He devours men and does much harm,” she softens the sinister side of the protagonist as much as possible. As Faure points out in “Le Bisclavret de Marie de France, une histoire suspecte de loup-garou,” such handling results in the creation of a rather peculiar beast, a beast that does not seem very fearful, is neither a killer, nor a man eater, nor a ravager of flocks: “Le lai de Marie de France met en scène un loup-garou un peu particulier, qui n’a pas l’air très redoutable, ni tueur, ni mangeur d’hommes, ni dévastateur de troupeaux (345).” Harf-Lancner also notes in “La Métamorphose illusoire” that by blurring the hero’s werewolf image, Marie de France weakens the metamorphosis theme. The feudal context of this story, particularly the misdeed committed against the hero and the reparation of the offense, seems to overshadow the transmutation almost to the extent of relegating it to the background (221). Portraying the injured party as a beast provides a convenient vehicle for the carrying out of vengeful acts against the perpetrators. The burden of self-control is lifted and the champion is free to perform actions that he might not perform as a man, and to have the actions condoned.

Although Melion's composer may have been somewhat less skillful than Marie de France in the overall crafting of his tale, the character of Melion is intricately and pragmatically developed. This author, while drawing on other motifs from folklore and legend, such as the magic ring and the allusion to the fairy mistress, also gave some thought as to what it might be like to shift from man to wolf and to return. The corporal changes that the protagonist undergoes follow a prescribed ritual and are explicitly evoked. At the onset of the initial transformation, the squire removes Melion's shoes, the knight enters the woods, takes off his clothes, and drapes his cloak around himself. His wife then taps his head with the white stone in the ring. There is some indication that the alteration is painful: "En grant paine s'est enbatus (182)" "In great pain he gave way," but nevertheless, he soon becomes a "leu grant et corsus (181)" "large, powerfully built wolf." The restitution scene in which the face begins to change, then the body, and finally the power of speech returns, has been described as a "scène exceptionnelle qui présente enfin la métamorphose dans son mouvement: l'homme apparaît peu à peu sous la bête" "an exceptional scene which finally presents the metamorphosis in movement: the man appears little by little beneath the beast (Harf –Lancner 220)."

Let us sum up these findings by putting them in the form of a diagram.

THE THREE SEGMENTS IN WHICH THE STORIES DIFFER THE MOST

man → wolf

- M -ritual is in place for bringing about the change
B -act of removing and hiding clothes brings about the change
- M - magic ring is the essential item
B - clothes are the essential item
- M -change is voluntary
B -change is involuntary
- M -change seems to be a single occurrence
B -change happens weekly
- M -change is accomplished with some difficulty
B -no description of the change itself is given
- M -change is witnessed, requires the help of another
B -change is not witnessed

feral state

- M -wolf maintains his human ability to reason
B -reader is only aware of the wolf's ability to reason at the point where he seeks out the king
- M -wolf commits many atrocities against humans and animals
B -wolf is not seen carrying out atrocities, but reports living on prey and rapine
- M -wolf is a leader, takes action
B -wolf is apparently a loner, no real information is given

wolf → man

- M -transformation takes place in a private room
B -transformation takes place in a private room
- M -transformation is witnessed and aided by another
B -transformation is not witnessed
- M -transformation is a four step process
B -transformation is not described
- M -red stone in the ring is essential, cast-off clothing is forgotten
B -cast-off clothing is essential
- M -character speaks, proving his return to human state
B -character has no further place in the dialog
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Significant differences in the treatment of three out of four segments show that Melion is unlikely to be a direct derivative of Bisclavret. Fundamental information regarding the shift, the exclusion of the beast from human society and his subsequent return to man form is missing from the Bisclavret story, yet appears in detail in Melion. The analysis given in this essay substantiates the hypothesis supported by many scholars today that the two lays are independent versions of the same saga.

NOTES

¹ The Tobin text is edited from MS C Paris, Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal.

² Burgess' analytical bibliography, The Old French Narrative Lay, published in 1995, cites 1268 (p. 93).

³ Ewert states that it was sometime before 1187 (p.x), Rychner limits it to between 1160 and 1170, Warnke says 1170 (p.10).

⁴ Kittredge 173, Grimes, p. 36, Ménard p. 222, Tobin p. 81.

⁵ Grimes cites Kittredge's classification of the source as being an Irish legend (p. 36). Harf-Lancner cites the classification of Aarne-Thompson, who considers the source to be a story of Eastern European origin, "le Chien du tsar" (p. 221).

⁶ Kittredge, p. 174, considers the story of the noseless descendants to be a Breton family legend, but Faure says "l' enasement' est le châtime nt réservé aux traîtres dans la chanson de geste," note p. 355.

⁷ The two counselors use some similar discourse. One verse is almost identical: M 504 "Segnor, ne faites mie bien; B 283 'Sire, ne fetes mie bien.' Foulet considers such verbal likenesses as evidence that Melion is an adaptation of Bisclavret. See Grimes, p. 36.

⁸ The ring motif shows up in another werewolf story, Le Roman de Guillaume de Palerne. A gold ring with stones that protect against evil is hung around the werewolf's neck. See Grimes p. 37, Ménard p. 214.

⁹ "The form *bisclavret* (*bisclaret*) derives from the Breton *bleiz laualet* 'speaking wolf;'" p. 172, notes, Marie de France, Lais, Ewert, ed.

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