

# Loyalty, Weasels, and Feminism in Marie de France's *Eliduc*, or *Guilhelüec and Guilliadun*

DAVID ESPARZA



---

*WRITER'S COMMENT: I wrote this essay for English 189, a seminar taught by Professor Claire M. Waters focused on Feminist Fairy Tales. I was drawn to the seminar topic because I wanted to expand my understanding of medieval texts, especially feminist ones, in conjunction with modern literature. Throughout the class, I learned more about the roots of the fairy tale genre and how simple stories hold massive complexities—what previously seemed like a format plagued by patriarchal systems could just as easily be transformed into critique. When we read the 12th-century lai from Marie de France, the subject of this essay, I knew that my final paper had to be centered on it. The double title, the resistance by critics to use that title, and the “weasel episode” in the lai all cemented my decision. It was extraordinarily fulfilling to write in conversation with previous critics and add my own argument, molded by the subject of the class, to the work surrounding Marie de France.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: By the time I read David's final essay, I wasn't surprised at its excellence; I had had a whole quarter in which to prepare. From his first discussion post, an elegant mini-essay that commented on the argumentative style of one of our critical articles, applied its terms to the primary readings, and engaged with that week's texts and others we had not yet reached, it was clear that he was working at a level appropriate to a graduate student. His papers showed a consistent ability to notice essential but fleeting details and demonstrate their significance, always in elegant prose. His final paper on Guilhelüec and Guilliadun argues, with typical dry wit, that what he calls its “pre-weasel” and “post-weasel” narratives reflect, but do not bound, the shift from the story's initial male protagonist to the two women who enable its happy ending; in fact that shift begins much*

earlier than the “weasel episode.” The essay takes on a much-studied text (in its original language, Old French) and offers an incisive, critically aware, and original account of its characterization and structure.

—Claire Waters, Department of English

The closing piece of Marie De France’s *lais*,<sup>1</sup> the dually titled “*Eliduc, or Guildelüec and Guilliadun*,” explores the loyalties between the central characters and their eventual reconciliation. Building upon the arguments of past critics such as Usha Vishnuvajjala, who describes the discrepancies between Eliduc’s loyalties in word and in action,<sup>2</sup> and Danielle Gurevitch, who investigates the medicinal properties of the rejuvenating flower in the *lai*,<sup>3</sup> I will argue in this essay for the agency of the titular women. By taking the “weasel episode,” as Brewster Fitz terms it,<sup>4</sup> and placing it in the context of Eliduc’s haphazard loyalties, I posit that the freedom that Guilliadun and Guildelüec hold in the *lai* far exceeds that of their lord and lover. The fairy-tale quality of the weasel episode, along with the conflicting ties that Eliduc has to his lords, God, and his wives, point to a courtly loophole that the titular women exist in where they hold control over their desires. I will argue that far from being a tale of piety and comeuppance, *Guildelüec and Guilliadun* is a feminist fairy tale whose “happily ever after” is possible only through the women’s efforts.

## Loyalty

Eliduc’s life is defined by his vying loyalties to different entities, creating a web of conflicting interests that leave him unable to perform the responsibilities of his position. The first problem is one of *lealté*, which

---

1 Claire M. Waters, ed. and trans., *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Translation* (Peterborough, UK: Broadview, 2018).

2 Usha Vishnuvajjala, “Adventure, Lealté, and Sympathy in Marie de France’s *Eliduc*.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 59.2 (2017).

3 Danielle Gurevitch, “The Weasel, The Rose and Life After Death: Representations Of Medieval Physiology in Marie de France’s *Eliduc*.” *Restoring the Mystery of the Rainbow* (2011).

4 Brewster E. Fitz, “The Storm Episode and the Weasel Episode: Sacrificial Casuistry in Marie de France’s *Eliduc*.” *MLN* 89.4(1974).

has legal connotations and consequences; the second is *fiance*, which recurs in the story in reference to romance—and in one case to his new lord; the last problem is *fei*, the tenuous relationship he holds with God that is at odds with his earthly desires until the ending reconciliation. In her analysis, Vishnuvajjala notes that Eliduc “is conflicted both in his understanding of how to negotiate the different loyalties he holds and [in] his own feelings.”<sup>5</sup> The inner turmoil that Vishnuvajjala describes prevents Eliduc from being the hero of the lai—shifting that responsibility onto the titular women.

At the beginning of the lai, Eliduc is already tied to his lord and lady in a restrictive manner, and continually pledges allegiances that restrict him further. Marie says of Eliduc and Guildelüec, “*Ensemble furent lungement, / Mut s’entreamerent lëument*,”<sup>6</sup> the relationship between Eliduc and the king is laid out in the same fashion:

*Elidus aveit un seignur,  
Reis de Brutaine la meinur,  
Que mut l’amot e cherisseit  
E il lëaument le serveit.*<sup>7</sup>

Eliduc had a lord,  
king of Brittany,  
who loved and cherished him greatly,  
and Eliduc served him loyally.<sup>8</sup>

From the outset, Marie equates Guildelüec and the king; both are figures that Eliduc must serve because of the legal ties of courtly life. Additionally, Eliduc and his wife are connected through the marriage institution and religion. These expository relationships create problems for Eliduc later on when he has two lords and two women—as well as their respective loyalties—to manage. Despite knowing the legal connotation of *lealté*, as demonstrated in his speech to his soldiers before going off to battle,<sup>9</sup>

---

5 Vishnuvajjala, 165-66.

6 Waters, 300. “They were together a long time / they loved one another loyally.”

7 Waters, 300.

8 Waters, 301. Translation of previous note.

9 Waters, 310.

he still pledges himself in this manner to his new lord and his lover. The conflicting relationships require Eliduc to resort to a new term, one that neither Guilliadun nor Guildelüec ever uses, in the form of *fiance*. The translator notes the difficulty of this term, which results in it appearing in English as both *loyalty* and *faith*: “Eliduc’s words point to the ambiguity of his relationship to the king’s daughter.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, Guilliadun is in a loophole, wherein she exists as more than a lover but less than a wife to Eliduc (later we will discuss how this influences her agency); the situation is mirrored with her father, to whom Eliduc also pledges his *fiance*.<sup>11</sup> In effect, the ambiguity of this term disguises its empty promise. Despite the agreement to guard the lands of his new lord for a year, Eliduc departs when *lealté* calls him back to his own land. These ties of *lealté* separate Guilliadun and her lover, and the promise between them is only fulfilled when Guildelüec takes control of the situation. Through his empty promises, Eliduc is ineffectual in both loyalty and faith.

In addition to his ambiguity with *fiance*, Eliduc is also at odds with his Christian faith; when he speaks of *fei*, he does not use it to mean his religion or belief, but rather his earthly relationships. Sharon Kinoshita, in her discussion of serial polygamy in the *lais*, makes note of Eliduc’s increasingly rash decisions and how they contend with his faith,<sup>12</sup> but I argue that this tension also manifests subconsciously. After Guilliadun threatens suicide at the thought of his departure, his response speaks to the inner conflict he is facing with Christianity:

“Bele, jeo sui par serement  
A vostre pere veirement:  
Si jeo vus en menoe od mei,  
Jeo li mentireie ma fei—  
De si k'al terme ki fu mis.”<sup>13</sup>

“Beloved, I am truly bound  
by oath to your father:  
if I were to take you away with me,

---

10 Waters, 333.

11 Waters, 314.

12 Sharon Kinoshita, “Two for the Price of One: Courtly Love and Serial Polygamy in the *Lais* of Marie de France,” *Arthuriana* 8.2 (1998).

13 Waters, 334.

I would betray my faith—until the term that was set.”<sup>14</sup>

The slip of the tongue, where Eliduc mentions faith/*fei* and quickly corrects it to mean faith to his lord, betrays his concern; because of his marriage to Guildelüec, he is unable to comply fully with his lover's wishes. He disguises his faith (which he promises to his wife before leaving) as loyalty to the king, but the problem of polygamy does not go away—Guilliadun insists on accompanying her lover. He had vocalized his concerns prior to this: “Before returning to Brittany, he had raised the possibility of marrying Guilliadun only to dismiss it: ‘*S’a m’amie esteie espusez, / Nel sufferreit crestientez. . .*’”<sup>15</sup> However, this dual concern, one of polygamy and one of being unable to be with Guilliadun, also manifests itself in Eliduc's personal interactions. When he returns to Brittany, Eliduc's friends and relatives greet him warmly, yet he remains sullen and secretive.<sup>16</sup> The hero of the story, or so we are led to believe, is unable to participate in courtly life in the same manner he has in the past. Instead of a renowned knight, we are left with a despondent character. The tensions that the knight creates for himself through conflicting loyalties and fear of God's retribution, as evidenced by these subconscious quirks and the cold-blooded murder of the critiquing sailor, emphasize the need for a dual title in the lai. Sitting beside the dishonest protagonist are two women (with the help of two weasels) whose relationship transcends the hero narrative.

## The Weasel Episode

The inclusion of animals in a lai about loyalty allows a transition into a different kind of tale. Up to the point of the weasel episode, the lai is firmly rooted in Eliduc's actions and their consequences; by shifting the narrative towards the two women, Marie de France centers on her claim at the beginning that the lai can also be called *Guildelüec and Guilliadun*. This is made clear through the weasel revival, and more specifically

---

14 Waters, 335. Translation of previous note.

15 Kinoshita, 46; the line she includes is found in *The Laís of Marie de France: Text and Translation* on page 330, translated on page 331 as “If I were to marry my beloved, / the Christian faith would not tolerate it.”

16 Waters, 334.

through the gender of the weasels. Though earlier critics have drawn connections between the battered weasel and the sailor onboard Eliduc's ship,<sup>17</sup> closer attention to the words used to refer to the weasels makes it clear that the animals are female. The translator for the Broadview edition includes this note in regards to the animals: "One could call this weasel 'it,' since *musteile* is a feminine noun regardless of the sex . . . but the translation aims to reflect the density of feminine forms in this passage, and the fact that both weasels are referred to as '*cumpaine*.'"<sup>18</sup> Given the importance of animals whenever they appear in the lais, these female weasels are key to unravelling the role of the titular women as fairy-tale protagonists.

Guidelüec is a spectator to the strangely human actions that the living weasel performs, and she becomes the first person in the narrative to witness a magical event; because this comes immediately after her intention to take the veil, Guidelüec assumes the role of a protagonist. From this point on in the lai, Eliduc is reduced to a spectator of his own tale, and thereby assumes a secondary role to the two women: "Although much of the text consists of Eliduc's attempt to navigate his promises and obligations . . . the climax of the story is precipitated by a meeting between the two women."<sup>19</sup> Though the analogy is anachronistic, Guidelüec becomes the prince in a Sleeping Beauty story. For the modern reader, the presence of magical animals in a revival scene serves to reinforce this image. By observing the weasels and imitating the resurrection, Guidelüec is able to wake her rival in love and explain the current situation to her. Eliduc, in contrast, has no companion,<sup>20</sup> no magical event, and no Prince Charming moment. As Vishnuvajjala notes in her analysis, Eliduc is entirely reliant on his wife to resolve the conflict in the narrative.

In addition to her new starring role, Guidelüec also assumes the role of a medieval healer; compared to her husband, who is stuck in a purely feudal world of loyalties, she is able to bridge the gap between fantasy (a magical weasel event) and reality (through herbal medicine). Gurevitch makes this connection early on in her investigation of the reviving flower:

---

17 Fitz, 548.

18 Waters, 350.

19 Vishnuvajjala, 163.

20 Waters, 354.

Marie de France's poetic sensitivity towards the concept of revival in *Eliduc* reflects the strong alliance between experimental science, religion and magic. To be more precise, between recent and ancient lore and beliefs as well as between monastic and druidic medical representations of her time.<sup>21</sup>

Gurevitch's extensive research leads her to posit that the lai's flower is a rose, one that aligns with religious interpretations at the time of writing and paints the scene in an allegorical Christian light.<sup>22</sup> The combination of real-life medicinal properties of the rose and its religious connotations reinforces Guildelüec's position as the story's new protagonist. Apart from taking the druidic elements—by observing the two weasels and imitating their holistic healing—she also acts as a guardian figure for Guilliadun when she wakes up. Not only does she revive the Sleeping Beauty, she makes the marriage between the two lovers possible. She is both a courtly and a healing figure at this point in the narrative, whereas Eliduc had previously failed in both. Guilliadun develops from a secret mistress into a full-fledged Sleeping Beauty and wife to Eliduc, and is (by Guildelüec's actions) the primary recipient of a "happily ever after."

The titular women of the lai not only replace Eliduc as the protagonist of the story, they surpass him and serve as more effective heroes. The mirroring of actions between Eliduc and Guildelüec makes this belittling more prominent. Both use espionage in order to succeed in their challenges: Eliduc uses the intelligence from his soldiers when he arrives in Exeter, and Guildelüec orders her servant to spy on her husband. In this respect they are equal, but it is necessary to note the context and timing of Eliduc's mission. When he arrives in Exeter, the king is under siege by his neighbor and in need of military assistance; just as the visiting Beowulf emasculates King Hrothgar, Eliduc emasculates the king of Exeter. He then pledges his ambiguous *fiance* to the king, begins a relationship with the king's daughter, and steals the daughter away. By contrast, Guildelüec plays the part of the hero more valiantly: she gathers intelligence, rescues a catatonic stranger, affirms her loyalty to her husband by annulling their marriage and pledging herself to God, and facilitates the marriage between Guilliadun and Eliduc. She repeats

---

21 Gurevitch, 3.

22 Gurevitch, 15.

emasculating story structures in order to assert herself as a worthy titular character.

Even if we define a medieval hero as someone who solves problems with both brains and brawn, Eliduc falls short of his wife. When Eliduc is confronted by the sailor onboard the ship, he responds with violence. However, this act of violence only comes after Guilliadun has fainted. Though she has already heard the truth, Eliduc lashes out against the sailor and throws him overboard. Fitz lays out this “sacrificial crisis” and its consequences, and we see the uselessness of Eliduc’s actions in light of the storm episode:

The sailor’s expulsion from the boat marks the reception of mercy for which the passengers clamored. This mercy does not come in the form of the storm’s being stilled, rather it comes as Eliduc’s decision to re-assume an active role. The obstacle to be overcome was not the storm per se, but the predicament that on the individual and social level deprived the community of an able leader.<sup>23</sup>

Despite assuming an active role again—implying that before the storm episode he had lost his role—Eliduc is unable to save his lover from her apparent death. Violence in this case does nothing to solve the core problem: Guilliadun’s “death” does not excuse the attempted polygamy (because Eliduc continues to visit her), just as the sailor’s death did not make the storm any more tolerable (because neither death would have been happened if Eliduc had retained his active role throughout the story). Guildelüec’s violence, on the other hand, has a positive quality. By ordering her servant to kill the first weasel, and then beating the second weasel to steal its restorative flower, Guildelüec is able to revive Guilliadun. Eliduc’s wife not only possesses the power to ensure his happiness—by taking the veil willingly and without his suggestion—but also the power to solve problems through calculated violence, fulfilling the posited requirements for a medieval hero. Guilliadun exhibits similar qualities, as she is not solely a damsel in distress and Sleeping Beauty figure, but also a character with vocal desires and self-determination.

We have covered the various transformations that occur in the

---

23 Fitz, 547.

story, which contribute to Eliduc's narrative becoming a fairy tale focused around the titular women. However, we have yet to cover what makes this a specifically feminist fairy tale, which is where Guilliadun's perspective becomes necessary. Though the lai may appear to have a definitive turning point—resulting in a pre-weasel narrative and post-weasel narrative that marks a change from male protagonist to female protagonists—Guilliadun's agency makes it clear that the lai is female-focused for the majority of the tale. We see her openly express desire towards Eliduc early in the text,<sup>24</sup> but it is her courtship and declaration of self-possession that transforms her into a feminist figure:

*Ele respunt al chevalier  
Que de [ses mots] li esteit mut bel,  
E pur ceo l'enveat l'anel  
E la ceinture autresi,  
Que de sun cors l'aveit seisi;  
Ele l'amat de tel amur,  
De lui volt faire sun seignur.<sup>25</sup>*

She replies to the knight  
that she was delighted by [his words],  
and that is why she sent the ring  
and the belt as well,  
because she had given him possession of herself;<sup>26</sup>  
she loved him with such love  
that she wanted to make him her lord.<sup>27</sup>

By giving Eliduc possession of herself, Guilliadun takes the place of two figures—her father, who would traditionally arrange her marriage, and a royal suitor proposing marriage. Given the context of the accompanying emasculation in the lai, this detail places Guilliadun firmly in the camp of feminist fairy tale protagonists. Though we traditionally see this genre as a modern invention, *Guildelüec and Guilliadun* and its central

---

24 Waters, 314.

25 Waters, 324; brackets mine and replacing the word “*ceo*.”

26 Translator's note, 325: “The verb here, *seisir* (*de*), has the technical sense of putting someone in formal legal possession of something, usually of land.”

27 Waters, 325. Translation of note 25.

characters display the deep generic roots stemming from the lais of Marie de France. The weasel episode, the fixation of Eliduc on conflicting loyalties, the agency of the titular women, and the feminist perspective that Marie draws in *Eliduc, or Guildelüec and Guilliadun* all point to a long-standing fairy-tale tradition of subverting narrative structures for social commentary, complete with a “happily ever after.”

## Bibliography

- Coolidge, Sharon. “*Eliduc* and the Iconography of Love.” *Mediaeval Studies* 54 (1992): 274–85. <https://doi.org/10.1484/j.ms.2.306398>.
- Fitz, Brewster E. “The Storm Episode and the Weasel Episode: Sacrificial Casuistry in Marie de France’s *Eliduc*.” *MLN* 89, no. 4 (1974): 542–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2907323>.
- Gurevitch, Danielle. “The Weasel, The Rose And Life After Death: Representations Of Medieval Physiology In Marie De France’s *Eliduc*.” *Restoring the Mystery of the Rainbow: Literature’s Refraction of Science*, ed. Valeria Tinkler-Villani and C.C. Barfoot. Leiden: Brill, 2011. 207–23. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401200011\\_013](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401200011_013).
- Hieatt, Constance B. “*Eliduc* Revisited: John Fowles and Marie De France.” *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 3.3 (1977): 351–58. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.1977.0032>.
- Kinoshita, Sharon. “Two for the Price of One: Courtly Love and Serial Polygamy in the *Lais* of Marie de France.” *Arthuriana* 8.2 (1998): 33–55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/art.1998.0011>.
- Nelson, Deborah. “*Eliduc*’s Salvation.” In *The French Review* 55.1 (1981): 37–42. [www.jstor.org/stable/390982](http://www.jstor.org/stable/390982).
- Pierre, Jonin. “*Le Roi dans les Lais de Marie de France: L’Homme Sous Le Personnage*.” *Essays in Early French Literature—Presented to Barbara M. Craig* ed. by Norris. J. Lacy and Jerry C. Nash, (French Literature Publications Company: York, SC, 1982), 25–41.
- Prior, Sandra Pierson. “‘*Kar des dames est avenu/L’aventure*,’ Displacing the Chivalric Hero in Marie de France’s *Eliduc*.” In *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love, Ovid through Chaucer* (1998): 123–39.

Vishnuvajjala, Usha. "Adventure, Lealté, and Sympathy in Marie de France's *Eliduc*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 59.2 (2017): 162–81. <https://doi.org/10.7560/tsll59202>.

Waters, Claire M., ed. and trans. *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Translation*. Peterborough, UK: Broadview Editions, 2018.