

Word Gets Around – Oral communication connecting communities in the *Lais* of Marie de France

Eleanor Hodgson
(Department of French)

Composed at the end of the twelfth century, the twelve individual texts that make up the *Lais* of Marie de France are possibly the best-known and best-loved examples of Old French literature.¹ The *Lais* were popular during the Middle Ages, as shown by the existence of six manuscripts in which they are preserved, and the mysterious figure of Marie de France and her works remain a constant source of interest for modern scholars.²

¹ The twelve individual *lais* are: *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fraisne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Les Douz Amanz*, *Yonec*, *L'Aüstic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chievrefueil*, and *Eliduc*, preceded by a General Prologue. Laurence Harf-Lancner, 'Introduction', in *Lais de Marie de France*, trans. by Laurence Harf-Lancner and ed. by Karl Warnke (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), p.8.

² The six manuscripts that contain the *lais* present different assemblages of the texts alongside other works, in some cases only featuring one individual *lai*. The only manuscript in which the complete set of twelve are presented together is the Harley 978 manuscript at the British Library, which also contains diverse texts such as Old English poems, music, and the *Fables* of Marie de France. For more information on this manuscript, see <<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8682>> [accessed 30 January 2012]. Maurice Delbouille, 'El chief de cest comencement...' (Marie de France, *Prologue de Guigemar*), in *Etudes de civilisation médiévale (IX^e- XII^e siècles): Mélanges offerts à Edmond-René Labande* (Poitiers: Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de Civilisation Médiévale, 1974), pp.185-6 and Ernst Hoepffner, 'La tradition manuscrite des *Lais de Marie de France*', *Neophilologus*, 12 (1927), pp. 1-10 and 85-96.

It is commonly agreed that the main preoccupation of the *Lais* is love, and this love is founded on communication between those involved in the relationships depicted.³ However, communication is not simply an important aspect of the romantic relationships portrayed by Marie — it is central to the entire collection, connecting individual protagonists as well as larger communities within the texts. Furthermore, although Marie depicts both oral and visual communicative media in the *Lais*, oral communication is the dominant form of communication used by the characters. This dominance is most keenly felt amongst the wider communities portrayed by the poet: those members of the fictitious societies in which the *Lais* are set, those who belonged to the community from which Marie took her sources, and those who made up Marie's audience in Anglo-Norman twelfth-century France. All of these communities would have been largely illiterate. Therefore, in order to understand the *Lais* within their socio-historical and literary context, we must recognise the importance of orality as a vehicle for communication within the community from which Marie's audience originated, as well as for the claimed sources of her collection.

This article will examine the portrayal of oral communication in the *Lais*, an area of study that remains somewhat neglected by scholars.⁴ It will look at the way in which oral communication is depicted as a means of connecting characters in the individual texts, before seeking to establish an understanding of the role played by Marie in connecting the predominantly oral community from which her *Lais* originated with the developing community of Old French literature at the end of the twelfth century.

Before turning to the *Lais*, we must first understand something about literacy in the late twelfth century, and the literary context of these works. It is well known that throughout the Middle Ages, the majority of the population was illiterate.⁵ At this time, literacy was defined with exclusive reference to Latin (the language in which reading and writing were

³ Karl Warnke, *Die Lais der Marie de France* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1900). p.xxiii and Hoepffner, 'La tradition manuscrite des *Lais de Marie de France*', pp.1-10.

⁴ There is only one study with communication as its main focus: Camille Dauphin-Persuy, "'L'aventure li manderai!": Désir de communication dans les *Lais* de Marie de France', *Women in French Studies*, 8 (2005), pp. 110-21. Michelle Freeman discusses tension and ambiguity in Marie's communication to her audience in 'Marie de France's Poetics of Silence: The Implications for a Feminine Translatio', *PMLA*, 99 (1984), pp. 860-3, and Anne Paupert focuses on women's oral communication in 'Les femmes et la parole dans les *Lais* de Marie de France', in *Amour et merveille: Les 'Lais' de Marie de France*, ed. by Jean Dufournet (Paris: Champion, 1995), pp.169-87.

⁵ Franz H. Bäuml, 'Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy', *Speculum*, 55 (1980), p.237.

taught), and the term *litteratus* was used for someone who could read and write in Latin.⁶ As a consequence, illiteracy was not simply found in the lower, poorer ranks of society, but was a part of the lives of the majority of the population. Most people relied on oral communication for the exchange of everyday information, as well as for the circulation of stories and tales that entertained them. These tales were passed on orally in the vernacular languages, and an initial inexistence of a written form for these local and non-formalised languages separated them from the literate language of Latin.

Literacy was predominantly a feature of the clerks, who formed an exclusive literate elite. In the Middle Ages it was not uncommon to find knights, barons, and higher-ranking nobles who were '[dependent] on the written word for the exercise of their socio-political function', but could not read and write themselves.⁷ These members of the higher ranks of society were therefore reliant on others to mediate written messages to them, using *interpretes* to handle written texts for them, being read to rather than reading themselves.⁸ Modern scholars name such members of medieval society as 'quasi-literate', and the common image of a messenger delivering a written message orally to its 'quasi-literate' recipient is found in many Old French texts.⁹ An example of such an episode is in the Old French romance *Guillaume de Palerne*. In this text, messengers arrive before the Emperor of Rome, and his reception of them is described by the poet: 'The emperor Nathaniel received the letters and broke the seal, and had a clerk read them to him' (vv.8448-50).¹⁰

Private messages are made public as they are read aloud, and this transformation of communication from visual to oral is emphasised by Marie in her *Lais*. In the opening passage of *Le Fraisne*, Marie describes the arrival of a messenger who kneels before the household and *tells* them his message (vv.21-2). In *Eliduc*, messengers are sent out by Eliduc carrying letters to effectively advertise his chivalric services to the king (v.112). Marie does

⁶ Bäuml, p.238; Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp.26-7; Cheryl Glenn, 'Medieval Literacy Outside the Academy: Popular Practice and Individual Technique', *College Composition and Communication*, 44 (1993), p.498.

⁷ Bäuml, p.246; Glenn, p.498; Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, 'Magical Mistress Tour: Patronage, Intellectual Property, and the Dissemination of Wealth in the *Lais* of Marie de France', *Signs*, 25 (2000), p.497.

⁸ Glenn, p.498; Brian Stock, *Listening for the text: On the uses of the past* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p.23 and p.37.

⁹ Bäuml, p.246.

¹⁰ *Guillaume de Palerne: Roman du XIII^e siècle*, ed. by Alexandre Micha (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1990), p.290.

state that these messages are written, yet when they reach the king, no further reference is made to these documents (vv.119-24). This leaves the audience to presume that the messengers conveyed Eliduc's proposal orally, and that it is oral communication that paves the way for the knight to be connected to a new kingdom.

In these examples we can see that Marie portrays characters communicating through both written (visual) and oral means. However, it is clear that oral communication remains a dominant force in the collection, acting as a bridge between characters and members of different literate and illiterate communities.

In the shortest *lai* of the collection, *Chievrefueil*, communication is used to connect an isolated individual to both the community from which he has been exiled, and, more importantly, to his beloved. The *lai* depicts a single episode in the well-known legend of Tristan and Iseut, and starts with Tristan alone in the forest after having been cast out by King Marc (vv.11-30).¹¹ Surrounded by 'peasants' and 'poor people' (v.33), Tristan asks for news of the queen (v.35), and is given information that has been conveyed orally to the illiterate population around him: 'Cil li *diënt* qu'il unt *oi*' [they *told* him what they had *heard*] (emphasis mine) (v.37). Thanks to this oral communication, Tristan learns that Marc and his bride will spend Pentecost at Tintagel (vv.36-43), and he begins to formulate a plan that will ensure a reunion with his beloved Iseut (vv.44-60).

Marie makes it clear that the oral circulation of information motivates Tristan's actions in the *lai*, and the lovers' brief meeting in the forest (vv.92-106) is only made possible because of his reception of this news. In turn, their time together is used to discuss the way in which Tristan can be reconciled with Marc (vv.95-101), and thus ensure his reacceptance into the king's court. Without the power of oral communication between the masses, Tristan would have remained alone and in exile in the forest, yet the *lai* leaves the audience assured that he will soon be reconnected with the community from which he is in exile.

Oral communication on a large scale (such as hearsay, or information conveyed orally by an unnamed source and obtained aurally by characters) acts as a catalyst for action in many of the *Lais*. Marie inserts a common topos in medieval texts, and shows characters actually falling in love with someone because of what they have heard about them — without ever having met or spoken to them.¹² This 'love by hearsay' motif is presented clearly in *Le*

¹¹ Jean-Claude Delclos, 'A la recherche du chèvrefeuille : Réflexions sur un lai de Marie de France', *Le Moyen Age*, 106 (2000), p.38.

¹² R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.74.

Fraisne, as Marie tells the audience how Gurun came to fall in love with *Fraisne*: ‘He heard people talking about the young girl and so fell in love with her’ (vv.257-8).¹³ An almost exact repetition of this idea is found in *Milun*, although it is reversed, as the woman falls in love with the man: ‘She heard others talk about *Milun* and began to love him dearly’ (vv.25-6). In *L’Aüistic*, the knight next door asks the lady for her hand, but the audience are told that she decides to love him because of ‘the good things she had heard about him’ as much as for his requests for love (vv.23-8).

The reputation of these characters is carried to the ears of those who then fall in love with them, and this is seen overall as a positive foundation for amorous sentiments that are then developed when the couple meet, see, and converse with one another. However, in *Equitan*, it appears that Marie questions the validity of such sentiments based purely on hearsay. Marie describes the beauty of the seneschal’s wife, before explaining how word of her attractiveness lured in her husband’s overlord: ‘Li reis l’oï sovent loër... / Senz veüe la coveita’ [The king often heard others praising her, and without seeing her began to desire her] (vv.42-5). Unlike other examples of love inspired by hearsay, Marie does not use the word ‘amer’ [to love] here, but ‘coveita’ [to desire], showing from the start of this *lai* that the king’s love for this woman is based upon lust. This indecent foundation for their relationship can be seen to justify the outcome of the text, as the lovers are both killed when their plot to kill the seneschal backfires on them (vv.269-312).

Oral communication is not depicted as an entirely positive force in the *Lais*, bringing together individuals within a courtly community who would have been better kept apart in *Equitan*. Alongside positive oral communication, Marie stresses the potentially destructive power of widespread oral dissemination of information, particularly when oral communication en masse develops from notions of hearsay to rumours that damage a character’s reputation as passed on orally through a community.

In one of the best known medieval treatises on love, Andreas Capellanus’ *De Amore* (*The Art of Courtly Love*), would-be courtly lovers are warned against the spread of ‘malicious gossip’ as a way of thwarting their adulterous pursuits.¹⁴ In the *Lais*, Marie manipulates the idea of gossip and hearsay as a negative aspect of oral communication, and one such example is found in *Les Dous Amanz*. In this text, a king refuses to marry his only

¹³ Bloch, p.74.

¹⁴ Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. by John Jay Parry (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1941), p.152.

daughter to suitors, choosing instead to keep her close to him to provide comfort after the death of his queen (vv.21-32). His actions are criticised by those in his kingdom, and soon the king hears the malicious gossip that others are spreading about him and is distressed by it (vv.35-6). In light of what he hears, he decides to reconnect himself to his people and offer his daughter to suitors. However, there is one condition — in order to win her hand, they must carry her to the top of the mountain next to the town without stopping. This seemingly impossible challenge is a direct result of oral communication, as he learns about his reputation aurally, and realises that he must react against these comments.

The *lai* unfolds such that a young nobleman falls in love with the princess, who grants him her love in return. However, in order to receive her father's consent, the young boy must undertake the challenge set forth by the king. Luckily, the couple acquire a fortifying potion that will aid him to complete the task without fear of failure, and set out on their ascent of the mountain (vv.155-87). As the young boy carries the princess up the hill in his arms, she speaks to him directly, asking him twice to drink the potion (vv.195-7 and v.210). Unfortunately, he is impervious to her requests, choosing instead to continue on his impossible quest unaided, telling his *amie*:

‘Ceste genz nus escriëreient,
de lur noise m'esturdireient;
tost me purreient desturber.
Jo ne vueil pas ci arester.’ (vv.203-6)

[These people would cry out
and the noise they make would stun me
and soon distract me.
I do not want to stop here.]

The young man will not drink his life-saving potion because he fears what the crowd will say about him, and it is the noise and the commotion that their words would make that he wishes to avoid. This is to his peril, because after repeatedly refusing to drink the potion, the boy finally collapses and dies (vv.207-15). The juxtaposition of ‘escriëreient’ and ‘esturdireient’ present a rhyme pair that indicates the power of oral communication — the noise will physically overpower him, yet their meaning and his perceived understanding of what the

crowd may say is also enough to dissuade him from stopping. Furthermore, the phonic similarity between these words is continued through the links between ‘esturdireient’ and ‘desturber’, showing an inherent oral and aural communication between the words used by the poet.

We have already seen how hearsay and a character’s reputation passed on orally in a community can influence their actions, and another example of the immeasurable power of the spoken word is given in *Le Fraisne*. A noble couple give birth to twin boys, and send messengers to the neighbouring house to communicate their good news. However, their foolish neighbour uses her voice to criticise all women who give birth to twins, stating that the birth of twins indicates a wife who has had relations with two different men (vv.31-42). Once uttered, her harsh words cannot be taken back, because she speaks out in front of her household (v.30) and sparks off a widespread condemnation of her character and her statement. What she says is passed on orally by members of her household, and is disseminated throughout Brittany, so that soon she is hated by all (vv.49-53). The lady’s foolish words are passed on from person to person orally, allowing the story of this woman to be propagated quickly, and connecting members of the community with a common source of hatred — one can well imagine the story as a talking point amongst the peasants and nobility, unifying the different ranks of society in their dislike for such a woman and her words.

Throughout the *Lais*, Marie stresses that communication must be used above all to ensure that the truth is known by the characters in her texts. The notion of truth is shown in *Le Fraisne*, as Marie states that the wicked and ill-speaking mother will pay the price for her spiteful utterance (v.54), describing how she soon gives birth to twins (vv.65-8). Her foolish words force her to give up one of her daughters at birth (vv.65-136), pretending instead that she had only one child. When mother and daughter are unknowingly reunited later on in the text, the lady identifies Fraisne by the symbols she gave her as a baby (vv.455-8), yet she must communicate the truth orally to her daughter and those around. Her actions and the oral dissemination of truth allow her daughter to be reconnected to the family and community from which she had been excluded. Furthermore, the final recognition of her noble birth also permits her marriage to her beloved Gurun (vv.503-17), thus bringing a positive conclusion to the *lai*, all the while emphasising the importance of truthful communication.¹⁵

¹⁵ A similar idea is explored in *Bisclavret*, as the knight’s wicked wife is made to tell the truth in front of the court in order for her husband to be restored to his human state (vv.265-74).

The idea of oral communication connecting characters through the propagation of truth is championed by Marie herself in the collection through her own authorial and narratorial/narratorial interjections. Marie insists repeatedly that she is telling her audience the truth: ‘la verité vus en cunt’ [I’m recounting the truth of it to you] and ‘Dit vus en ai la verité’ [I have told you the truth about it] (*Chievrefueil*, v.3 and v.117).¹⁶ Furthermore, in the prologue to *Guigemar*, Marie refers to ‘Les contes que jeo sai verais’ [stories that I know are true] (v.19), and given the positioning of this statement in the prologue of the first *lai*, one could see this reference to truth as applicable to the collection of *Lais* as a whole. This word ‘verais’ is linked inextricably with the rewriting process employed by Marie and other medieval poets, who belonged to a tradition in which their voices were used to assure their audiences of the truth of their tales by highlighting the origins of the texts that they were retelling.¹⁷ In the Middle Ages it was re-writing rather than original writing that was praised, since it was believed that no one other than God could create new texts *ex nihilo*.¹⁸ This common belief shared amongst poets created a literary community founded on the composition of texts through re-writing and intertextuality as a means of procuring authority — poets were dependent on other works and on each other for the success of their own texts.

Marie stresses that her collection originates from ‘Breton *lais*’ and emphasises communication between these original tales and her own texts. In the prologues and epilogues to individual *lais* Marie refers to *lais* that were made and told by the Breton communities, and is most often insistent on the oral origins of these *lais*, emphasising her own aural reception of these sources. An example of such emphasis is found at the start of the collection in the *Prologue* to the *Lais*:

¹⁶ Brewster E. Fitz, ‘Desire and Interpretation: Marie de France’s *Chievrefueil*’, *Yale French Studies*, 58 (1979), p.182.

¹⁷ Sophie Marnette, *Narrateur et points de vue dans la littérature française médiévale: une approche linguistique* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), p.34 and p.94 ; Ménard, *Les Lais de Marie de France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), p.56.

¹⁸ Monica L. Wright, *Weaving Narrative: Clothing in Twelfth-Century French Romance* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), pp.11-13; Douglas Kelly, *The Conspiracy of Allusion: Description, Rewriting, and Authorship from Macrobius to Medieval Romance* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1999), pp.111-2; Douglas Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p.39.

Des lais pensai qu' oïz aveie...
 que pur remembrance les firent
 des aventures qu' il oïrent... (vv.33-6)
 Plusurs en ai oïz conter... (v.39) (emphasis mine)

[I thought of the *lais* that I have *heard*...
 that were composed to remember adventures
 that they had *heard*... (vv.33-6)
 I have *heard* several of them *recounted*... (v.39)]

Unfortunately, a definition of the exact form of Breton *lais* is difficult to find, as none actually survive in manuscript form.¹⁹ This lack of written evidence for the existence of the Breton *lais* should not be seen in a negative light, but rather, it leaves us almost certain that these *lais* were part of an oral tradition. The oldest recorded use of the word 'lai' in Old French is in Wace's *Roman de Brut* (c.1155), where it has been understood as an indication of an instrumental melody, either with or without vocal accompaniment.²⁰ However, scholars have contradicting theories as to the exact form of these Breton *lais*, taking as their source the statements made by Marie in her collection, and by other anonymous poets of narrative *lais*.

In the Middle Ages many works written in verse, such as poems and *lais*, were intended to be performed orally, and, more importantly, it is thought that they were often sung.²¹ Looking at the surviving evidence about the Breton *lais*, it is commonly accepted that these works were also in some way musical, and Marie herself comments at the end of *Guigemar* that the Breton *lais* were 'composed for harp and rote' (vv.885-6). However, in the same epilogue, Marie states that she heard a 'cunte' [story] (v.883), indicating that the story

¹⁹ Gilbert Reaney, 'Concerning the origins of the medieval lai', *Music and Letters*, 39 (1958), p.344.

²⁰ Wace, *Le Roman de Brut*, ed. by Ivor Arnold, 2 vols (Paris: Société des anciens textes français, 1938), I, p.199; David Fallows, 'Lai', in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music online*.

<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/15841>> [accessed June 8, 2011]; Ernst Hoepffner, *Les Lais de Marie de France* (Paris: Boivin, 1935), p.43; Constance Bullock-Davies, 'The Form of the Breton Lay', *Medium aevum*, 42 (1973), p.21; Joseph Bédier, 'Les Lais de Marie de France', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 107 (1891), p.844.

²¹ Eric Méchoulan, 'From music to literature', *SubStance*, 28 (1999), p.42; Jacques Chailley, *Histoire musicale du moyen âge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), p.90; Gustave Cohen, *La vie littéraire en France au Moyen Age* (Paris: Tallander, 1953), p.113.

that the *lai* tells was also produced in a narrative form. Some scholars have interpreted this statement as indication that the Breton *lais* were half-sung, half-recited — yet what concerns us most is that these were predominantly oral works.²²

The clearest description given in the collection about the Breton *lais* is found in the prologue to *Equitan*, in which Marie describes how the *lais* originated as stories circulating orally, composed to conserve the memory of a particular event or adventure (*Equitan*, vv.1-10). Marie sees the source *lais* as a way of preserving Breton tales within the memory of an oral culture as they disseminated through communities and regions, emphasising their orality and her aural reception of them with her use of the verb ‘oïr’ [to hear]. Furthermore, this emphasis shows oral communication as the foundation for social cohesion and the construction of a community in which collective knowledge and participation in an oral tradition create a sense of togetherness. In terms of preservation within an oral tradition, demonstrated by the notion of ‘remembrance’, Marie’s own written texts not only preserve the *lais*, but also act as a link between two distinct communities: the Breton oral tradition of Marie’s claimed sources, and the developing written tradition of Old French Anglo-Norman literature within which she was writing.

Although Marie’s collection is preserved in a written manuscript, it is agreed that a medieval audience would have heard rather than read the *Lais*.²³ It was in the latter part of the twelfth century that ‘an increase in the use of writing in the vernacular...breached the link between Latin and literacy’, and stories that had circulated in society as part of the oral tradition were given a written form.²⁴ Yet this did not mean that the illiterate and quasi-literate populations could suddenly understand their own language when it was written down, since the majority of people were still unable to read or write at all. These vernacular texts therefore circulated orally amongst the general population, who would hear others read or recite them aloud.²⁵ Evidence for this is found in many medieval texts, as poets repeatedly

²² Marie also refers to written sources for her texts (*Chievrefueil*, vv.5-6 and *Guigemar* v.24). However, it is not the aim of the present study to debate the exact origins of these texts, but rather to concentrate on the accepted knowledge that they were disseminated orally.

²³ Ruth Crosby, ‘Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 11 (1936), p.88.

²⁴ Bäuml, p.244.

²⁵ Crosby, p.88; Bäuml, p.244.

indicate that their work is intended to be heard by an audience, often addressing their listeners directly.²⁶

The introduction of written vernacular languages resulted in a complex evolution from oral to written within what we now refer to as ‘literature’, and it is clear that the poets who began writing vernacular texts were aware of this transformation and ‘took steps to mitigate it’.²⁷ The ‘blend of oral and written cultures’ identified by scholars in early verse romance in Old French is an equally integral feature of the *Lais* of Marie de France, as the poet tried to use her texts as both a written and oral vehicle of communication to connect her audience to her Breton sources.²⁸

Marie was aware of the oral nature of vernacular literature, and makes it clear in the *Lais* that her texts were created for aural reception as well as for private reading. At the end of the *Prologue*, she directly addresses the ‘noble king’ to whom the *Lais* are dedicated, asking him to accept her gift (vv.43-55), and finally beseeching him to listen to the collection, rather than to read the texts, ‘Ore oëz le comencement!’ [So now listen to the beginning!] (v.56). Furthermore, the prologue to *Guigemar* is as insistent upon the oral and aural nature of the *Lais* as the *Prologue*: ‘Oëz, seignur, que dit Marie’ [Listen, sirs, to what Marie says] (v.3) (emphasis mine). Throughout the collection, Marie speaks directly to the audience of her texts, and on more than one occasion Marie again asks her audience to *listen* to her (‘oëz’) (*Bisclavret* v.185 and v.234, *Milun* v.252, and *Yonec* v.472).

In her collection, Marie acts as a mediator, disseminating Breton *lais* from long-lost oral and written traditions to her audience. In doing so, she is placing her texts within the framework of *translatio studii*, transferring the knowledge of a predominantly oral community to a developing literate population.²⁹ The *Lais* are written texts that were clearly destined for oral performance and an aural reception, and which belong to the malleable

²⁶ Crosby, pp.94-100; Bäuml, p.245. For examples of direct poetic address, see *Le conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, ed. and trans. by Jean-Luc Leclanche (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003), p.2 (v.1); Guernes de Pont-Saint-Maxence, *La Vie de St Thomas le Martyr*, ed. by E. Walberg (Lund: C. W. K Gleerup, 1922), p.3 (v.22); Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal (Perceval)*, ed. by Félix Lecoy (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1972), p.7 (v.68).

²⁷ Stock (1983), p.31.

²⁸ Evelyn Birge Vitz, *Orality and Performance in Early French Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), p.ix; Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance*, p.76.

²⁹ The term ‘*translatio studii*’, taken from Latin, refers to the transfer (*translatio*) of culture or knowledge (*studii*) from one civilisation to another. Debora B. Schwartz, ‘*Translatio studii et imperii*’, accessible via <<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwartz/engl513/courtly/translat.htm>>.

literary tradition in which Marie was composing. They portray and embrace the change found in ‘literature’ during the latter part of the twelfth century, a time in which the oral and written traditions existed alongside one another and fused together to create new pathways in vernacular literature that were developed in the centuries that followed.

Although Marie was not alone in her understanding of the oral nature of her written work, it is significant that she chose to foreground this feature through her direct communication with the audience and within her narratives. In Marie’s *Lais*, oral communication brings together individuals, reconnecting characters to communities from which they have been exiled, and uniting others, by information that circulates orally. However, Marie stresses the negative consequences of the abuse of oral communication in the form of malicious hearsay or gossip. Above all, the collection serves as an example of the way in which oral communication connected illiterate and quasi-literate populations in the Middle Ages, because it mediates between a predominantly oral tradition of the Breton *lais*, and the developing written world of Old French literature, within which Marie’s audience were found. The texts emphasise their orality and encourage links to be forged between characters, between audience and poet, and between the Breton sources and their new narrative forms. Finally, their preservation in manuscript form ensures that they continue to connect an 800 year-old poet with a modern audience — a true testament to their success.