A Mockery of Misogyny

Marie de France’s *Bisclavret* tells the story of woman whose unknown marriage to a werewolf lands her in exile and for her bloodline to be cursed for the rest of its eternity with noseless women. Marie de France includes many subtle jabs at the misogyny of the court system through her sarcastic lines of distaste against the wife of Bisclavret. These sarcastic lines are, most times, closely followed by lines of her true feeling toward the usual actions of the court system and knighthood. Marie de France’s Bisclavret is a story of mockery toward the misogynistic outlook of the court system and knighthood during this time period.

One of the opening lines to the story of *Bisclavre*t is the depiction of werewolves being beasts of frenzy-like anger but is compared to the story as something of different value. Marie de France presents the story from the beginning as something that needs to be thought of and looked in a different light than the usual depiction of a werewolf. She writes, “The werewolf is a wild beast:/ when it is in that frenzy,/ it devours people and does great harm./ It lives in and roams the great forests./ Now I let this matter be;/ I want to tell of the *bisclavret*.” (9-14). Marie de France continues the story and clearly states that Bisclavret’s wife fears him so much that she doesn’t even want to question why he leaves her for so long with no explanation. Marie de France uses her sarcastic mockery to then turn the tables and say that the wife has betrayed Bisclavret in her fear of his weekly habit, “but I am so afraid of your anger/that there is nothing I fear more.’ … Thus Bisclavret was betrayed/ and brought to ruin by his wife.” (35-36; 125-126). Marie de France again makes this sarcastic mockery and follows it closely with her true feelings toward the situation, “Hear how well he avenged himself/… What worse could he have done to her?” (233; 235).

Marie de France shows through the horrible actions that took place against the lady of Bisclavret but is sure to sarcastically justify the court system and knighthood that usually take place in these situations. She speaks of the lady having her nose torn off, being tortured, and exiled from her home but all these actions were “justified” because of her “wrong-doings”, “It has never shown any wickedness,/ except to the lady I see here./ By the faith I owe you,/ he has some cause for anger against her” (245-249). She continues this attitude throughout the lai and through the end, “The man for whom she betrayed her lord” (307). She uses these lines to show that the court system is right in their actions against the lady of Bisclavret and that Bisclavret had every right in his actions toward her and the knight that she “betrayed” him with.

Marie de France mocks the misogynistic views and actions of the court system right under their noses. Those who are aware and criticize the actions of the court system and knighthood will recognize her satirical approach to the story of Bisclavret, however, those who support the court system and knighthood will agree with the treatment and consequences of lady Bisclavret. Depending on the belief system of the reader, Marie de France will be viewed as a misogynist herself or as the undercover feminist with subtle jabs at the system. Knowing the belief system of Marie de France, it can be assumed that the point of Bisclavret is to tell a story of the misogyny of the court system and knighthood.