

## MAKING SOMETHING OF NOTHING: THE EXCESSES OF STORYTELLING IN THE *LAIS* OF MARIE DE FRANCE AND *LA CHASTELAINE DE VERGI*

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### *Abstract*

The notion of exemplarity in literary texts is beset by irony and paradox, for the example must serve the dual and contrary functions of being both a one-off and also a paradigm to be copied. This article seeks to explore ways in which a ‘tactic of exemplarity’ at work in the text seizes upon the inherent ambiguity of the example in order to question the purpose and indeed the very viability of an exemplary narrative. The discussion focuses on two Old French texts which share common narrative material and employ this ‘tactic of exemplarity’: the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Lais*, attributed to Marie de France, and the anonymous thirteenth-century poem *La Chastelaine de Vergi*. Through analysis of the texts’ narrative framework—their prologues and/or epilogues—it is argued that a fundamental disparity emerges between the proclaimed didacticism of the narrative example and the way in which that example is then (not) worked through the text. The example is constituted by these texts as an absence or narrative hiatus, suggesting that the example represents a fundamental aporia in the text, and that any claim to exemplarity necessarily implies a problematic narrative standpoint which leaves itself open to deconstruction.

A common diegetic thread can be traced from the late twelfth-century *Lais* attributed to Marie de France to the anonymous thirteenth-century poem *La Chastelaine de Vergi*.<sup>1</sup> In what is perhaps Marie’s best-known tale, the eponymous knight Lanval pledges himself to an otherworldly mistress in a pact of secret love that will be dissolved should it ever be revealed, thus providing the basic narrative material replicated in the *Chastelaine* poem. Both tales exploit the motif of the *mulier perniciosa* (a scorned queen in Marie’s text, a jilted duchess in the *Chastelaine*) as the narrative catalyst for the denouement, tragically apocalyptic in the anonymous poem, somewhat more idyllic in Marie’s version of events.

In spite of their prima facie similarities, however, and as Laurence de Looze has commented, the two versions of the material differ sufficiently to ‘provide an excellent example of “mouvance” illustrating how much

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<sup>1</sup> Marie de France, *Lais*, ed. by Alfred Ewert (Oxford, Blackwell, 1947); *La Chastelaine de Vergi*, ed. by F. Whitehead, 2nd ed. (Manchester University Press, 1951, repr. 1961). All citations in my text are to these editions; line references are given in parentheses following quotations. If a translation is desired, the following may be consulted: *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, (London, Penguin, 1999; repr. 2003); *The Chastelaine of Vergi: A Romance of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. by Alice Kemp-Welch (London, Chatto and Windus, 1907).

the same basic story can “differ from itself”.<sup>2</sup> This concept of *mouvance*, suggestive of narrative slippage and non-identity, is especially fascinating when applied to literary texts, such as the *Lais* and the *Chastelaine de Vergi*, which assert their exemplarity: moralizing or didactic narratives which claim to afford the reader easy access to a presumed universal truth or meaning. How, exactly, can such a project be realized within a text that so obviously differs from itself, in which the internal tensions of irony prevent the hermetic closure of the narrative’s semantic field?<sup>3</sup>

Much as the exemplary text appears to proclaim its own didacticism with the proposal of a universal truth, the fact nevertheless remains that, as John D. Lyons has it, ‘examples have the quality of seeming rather than of being, they are associated with *species* and *imago*, and are therefore within the realm of all that is specious and imaginary’.<sup>4</sup> My essay responds to this paradox by addressing a number of aspects that encourage us to read Marie’s *Lais* and the *Chastelaine de Vergi* together as exposing the notion of narrative exemplarity not as a viable claim to universal truth or meaning, but rather as a form of Derridean *différance*, a problematic persistence of difference and deferral in the text that precludes the very closure of meaning that the exemplary narrative appears to attempt.

My approach in considering the treatment of exemplarity in these texts will be both inter- and intra-textual. An intra-textual mode of reading performs a deconstructive turn in seeking to read the narrative against itself, seizing on the text’s inherent ambiguities and logical aporias as sites at which the problematic of a text’s exemplary status comes most clearly into view. The former approach of inter-textual reading infers a theoretical position by means of comparison, by reading texts either with or against one another in order to identify their common features and divergences. The temporal dimension of an inter-textual reading has an important bearing on the claim to exemplarity made by these texts since, as Lyons points out, the example ‘reveals an identity that appears across chronological boundaries’.<sup>5</sup> This implies a certain paradox whereby ‘the

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Untellable Story: Language and Writing in *La Chastelaine de Vergi*’, *French Review*, 59 (1985), 42–50 (p. 43). Critics have tended to downplay similarities between the two renderings of the material: as Pál Lakits comments, ‘les ressemblances textuelles sont très vagues’ (*La Châtelaine de Vergy et l’évolution de la nouvelle courtoisie* (Debrecen, Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem, 1966), p. 15). Jean Rychnér opines that, in spite of their similarities, the two works ‘sont cependant si merveilleusement dissemblables qu’elles appellent une comparaison contrastée’ (*La présence et le point de vue du narrateur dans deux récits courts: le lai de “Lanval” et la Châtelaine de Vergi*, *Vox Romanica*, 39 (1980), 86–103 (p. 86)); André Maraud concludes that ‘de la combinaison des mêmes motifs naissent alors des thèmes différents’ (*Le Lai de “Lanval” et la Chastelaine de Vergi: la structure narrative*, *Romania*, 93 (1972), 433–59 (p. 433)).

<sup>3</sup> Linda Cooper asserts that ‘irony is the informing literary technical device of *La Châtelaine de Vergy*’ (*Irony as Courtly Poetic Truth in La Châtelaine de Vergy*, *Romanic Review*, 75 (1984), 273–82 (p. 273)).

<sup>4</sup> *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 10. Note Lyons’s assertion that the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘example’ were practically synonymous in some medieval usage (p. 11).

<sup>5</sup> Lyons, *Exemplum*, p. 11.

importance accorded the temporal order is paradoxically linked to the way example allows an act or object to reappear at different periods *and thus to defeat change*.<sup>6</sup> I will argue that difference is most readily identifiable within the semantic field of the text itself and that, even though our narrative material undergoes considerable mutation between its twelfth- and thirteenth-century workings, by reading them together we respond to an Aristotelian notion of exemplarity by means of induction (*epagoge*), whereby an underlying principle is identified by means of part-to-part comparison, establishing a likeness between particulars which allows intuition of the universal.<sup>7</sup>

Crucial to any assessment of the text's claim to exemplarity is what Alexander Gelley has termed a 'vector of reception': 'the example is never merely an instance; it is an instance plus its vector of reception'.<sup>8</sup> This vector should immediately be noted as the Achilles' heel in the proclaimed exemplarity of a text, since it implies an unknown directional movement corresponding to the unpredictable way in which the example appeals to, or indeed eludes, the receiver of the text (the reader/listener) and responds to his/her horizon of expectation. The crucial consequence of identifying such a vector at work in the text, however, is that 'as example, the particular is projected beyond itself'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Aristotle states in his discussion of the example (defined by means of induction) and the *enthymeme* (the result of deduction) in the *Rhetoric*, these rhetorical devices 'deal with what is for the most part capable of being otherwise'.<sup>10</sup> The exemplary text can never be self-identical, rather it always 'differs from itself' or is 'capable of being otherwise', in ways which become apparent in Marie de France's *Lais* and again in the *Chastelaine de Vergi*.

This slippage is perhaps most readily discernible in tensions between the narrative frame — the prologue and/or epilogue — and the story accommodated therein. The prologue–epilogue frame is frequently established as the locus at which a text proclaims its exemplarity, the place in which it promotes itself as *exemplum*. As Tony Hunt notes, 'the *Châtelaine de Vergi* ends with an epilogue which casts a retrospective glance at the action accomplished by the end of the narrative and draws from it a moral

<sup>6</sup> Lyons, *Exemplum*, p. 11, my emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle sets out his conception of this inductive model (*epagoge*) in the first book of the *Rhetoric*, stating that the example's relation to the proposition it supports 'is not that of part to whole, nor whole to part, nor whole to whole, but of part to part, or like to like' (*The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton University Press, 1984), (ii) *Rhetoric*, trans. by W. Rhys Roberts, 2152–269 (1357b29)). I employ standard Bekker references when citing this text.

<sup>8</sup> 'Introduction', in *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*, ed. by Alexander Gelley (Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 1–24 (p.14).

<sup>9</sup> 'Introduction', p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Rhetoric*, 1357a14.

lesson'.<sup>11</sup> The narrative frame has provided the focus for much of the critical attention directed towards the *Chastelaine de Vergi*. As Hunt observes, 'although there is no clearly delimited prologue, there is nevertheless an introduction which is as proleptic as the epilogue is retrospective'.<sup>12</sup> Particularly notable about the unclear delimitation of the quasi-prologue is the way in which, with the couplet in lines 17–18, the generality of the moral sentiment expressed in the preceding lines is suddenly anchored in, or reduced to, a specific location in time and space. This is a duplicitous gesture, implying the absolute commensurability of the universal principle with the particular case in hand:

Et sovent tel meschief en vient  
 que l'amor faillir en covient  
 a grant dolor et a vergoingne,  
 si comme il avint en Borgoingne. (15–18)<sup>13</sup>

This ostensibly seamless interweaving of the prologue with the narrative proper, or, to retain the conceit favoured by Hunt, the indistinction of the frame and the picture, is particularly crucial when we consider the discord that in fact develops between different parts of the narrative.

The central message of this poem's narrative frame, then, is an injunction to concealment, especially in the sphere of amorous relations. The language used is uncompromising — as in lines 954–55: 'li descouvrirs riens n'avance/ et li celers en toz poins vaut—' to the extent that, as Hunt comments, 'the moral perspectives of the tale are so rigorously established and imposed as to appear to exclude alternatives'.<sup>14</sup> This, then, is the *exemplum*,<sup>15</sup> the universal truth supposedly extrapolated from the tale which, when repeated in both the quasi-prologue and the epilogue, attempts to impose rigid closure upon the narrative, arresting any ambiguity of meaning in the text. However, that the *exemplum* should strive to encourage secrecy seems in itself particularly unsuitable, an act which leaves itself open to the ravages of irony, since, for Aristotle, the inductive process of *epagoge* is principally concerned with discovery (of the universal, or underlying principle), and it is of course this very un-covering ('li descouvrirs') that the prologue—epilogue of the *Chastelaine* poem so fiercely reproves.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> 'The Art of Concealment: *La Châteline de Vergi*', *French Studies*, vol. 47 (1993), 129–41 (p. 129). Hunt cites Thomas's *Tristan* as a further example of such a 'moral lesson' being imparted by the narrative frame, taking the form of an authorial intervention in the epilogue of that text.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Art of Concealment', p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> Rychner signals the importance of these lines in shifting the burden of proof for the moral of the story away from the frame and onto the main body of the narrative itself: 'il incombe au récit, né dans la subordination de ces sentences, d'en prouver la validité' ('La présence et le point de vue du narrateur', p. 86).

<sup>14</sup> 'The Art of Concealment', p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> This is explicitly stated in lines 951–52: 'Et par cest exemple doit l'en /s'amor celer par si grant sen'.

<sup>16</sup> As Gerard A. Hauser notes, '*epagoge* uses particular cases not just to develop arguments but as a means to discovery' ('Aristotle's Example Revisited', *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 18 (1985), 171–81

A serious flaw in the poem's frame is thus exposed, and this grows deeper still when we consider how what Gelley terms a 'tactic of exemplarity' is employed in this text.

At the heart of the issue lies the epistemological problem of distinguishing between the example as paradigm (universal) and as copy (particular). As Gelley asks, 'is the example merely *one*—a singular, a fruit of circumstance—or *the One*—a paradigm, a paragon? The tactic of exemplarity would seem to mingle the singular with the normative, to mark an instance as fated'.<sup>17</sup> Thus the tactic of exemplarity concertedly blurs the distinction between the example as universal model and/or as particular instance. Precisely such a blurring is evinced in the narrative frame of the *Chastelaine de Vergi* where, as Hunt notes, 'it emerges that the only difference between the introduction and the epilogue is that the proposed desirability of concealment is presented inductively in the first and deductively in the latter'.<sup>18</sup>

The tactic of exemplarity draws attention to the problem of knowing the universal. Gelley comments on 'the need to *think* a universal that we can never *know* in order to be capable of speaking of the particular at all'; it seems that it is only with the inference of an organizing principle that the particular becomes knowable.<sup>19</sup> The tactic of exemplarity, by juxtaposing the example as both particular and universal, thus creates a kind of double standard whereby the paradigm induced from particular examples is in fact only ever illusory, or subject to constant flux. Quoting Wittgenstein's aphorism 'you give him examples—but he has to guess their drift', Gelley indicates the way in which the saying 'you get my drift' subtly acknowledges that the alluded-to truth, the principle we induce from particular examples, is always unstable, drifting, *à la dérive*.<sup>20</sup> It is this double standard that Gelley decries as the 'scandal of the example':

The scandal of the example, its logical fallibility, lies in the fact that this ethical summons—the obligation to judge—is predicated not on a law or rule—thus at the level of the general of universal—but on the instance in its particularity, an instance that cannot in itself suffice to justify the principle in question.<sup>21</sup>

The very same scandal is already acknowledged in Aristotle's assertion that 'individual cases are so infinitely various that no systematic knowledge of them is possible'.<sup>22</sup>

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(p.174). Lyons points out that the Greek term *paradeigma* is 'always associated with light, showing, seeing, and pointing' (*Exemplum*, p.10).

<sup>17</sup> 'Introduction', p.2.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Art of Concealment', p.131.

<sup>19</sup> 'Introduction', p.7.

<sup>20</sup> 'Introduction', p.13.

<sup>21</sup> 'Introduction', p.14.

<sup>22</sup> *Rhetoric*, 1356b32.

How, then, might a tactic of exemplarity scandalize the *Chastelaine de Vergi*? Hunt's 1993 article builds on the positions previously established by critics, particularly Lakits and Cooper, whose work explores the fundamental irony of the poem; or, to repeat Hunt's metaphor, the way in which the narrative frame does not fit, or rather exceeds, its picture. As Lakits summarizes, 'la moralité exprimée et le sens authentique se contredisent', implying that the presumed circuit between particular and universal is broken in this text: the example ('la moralité exprimée') refuses to correspond with 'le sens authentique' of the particular case.<sup>23</sup> The injunction to concealment, so resolutely advocated by the prologue and epilogue of the poem, is thus *not* rehearsed by the main body of the narrative. A complex network of *jeux partis*, of conflicting duties and obligations, in fact determines the outcome, so that it would have been quite impossible for the protagonist (the anonymous knight) to maintain his concealing silence. The fundamental point to this, then, is that *no example* is actually established by the text, for the explicit injunction of the narrative frame cannot be borne out by the picture it attempts to contain.

This hypothesis of the example as an absence, or lack, demands further analysis, and appears to be substantiated in the *Chastelaine de Vergi* in more ways than critics have already identified. The moment at which the scorned duchess identifies the knight whom she maliciously accuses of having compromised her is particularly revealing in this respect:

Haez donc, dist ele, celui  
(sel nomma) qui ne fina hui  
de moi proier au lonc du jor  
que je li donaisse m'amor. (125–28)

The crux of these lines is the parenthesis, the gesture by means of which the narrative simultaneously reveals and conceals the identity of the slandered knight. De Looze's comments on this narrative hiatus are extremely illuminating:

When the duchess gives the name of the 'guilty' knight, our text both names him and highlights the deferral of his name by elliptically stating only that 'sel nomma.' The naming of the knight becomes the naming of the act of naming him, the naming of anonymity (our anonymous protagonist): the knight can have no name because there is no traitorous knight at court.<sup>24</sup>

There is only a short leap to make between this presence-constituted-as-absence and the way in which the example is both enjoined and rejected by the narrative. As de Looze comments, the way the knight's name is suppressed 'manages to preserve the act of naming without repeating the lie of the name', and in the same way the narrative succeeds in preserving its tactic

<sup>23</sup> *La Châtelaïne de Vergi*, p.63.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Untellable Story', pp.47–48.

of exemplarity without repeating the lie of the example.<sup>25</sup> If ‘the knight can have no name because there is no traitorous knight at court’, then the example cannot be substantiated by the text since, as Hunt maintains, ‘the introduction – epilogue successfully argues the case for its *own* concealment i.e. suppression’.<sup>26</sup> The text seizes upon its (false) injunction to concealment and turns this into the concealing of its own injunction: as Hunt concludes, ‘concealment of the sen or “moral” of the work is the only defence against perverse, simplistic or mischievous interpretation’.<sup>27</sup> The only way to seal the text’s field of meaning, to guarantee a ‘correct’ reception of the example, is precisely to annul the ‘vector of reception’, which in turn requires the paradoxical suppression of exemplarity itself.

The example in the *Chastelaine de Vergi* might therefore be seen to function as a kind of Derridean *supplément*, in the sense of both standing in for and adding to the narrative. The proclaimed exemplarity demands a reading of the text that is wholly at odds with the narrative itself; in this sense the example replaces the narrative. At the same time, the example is a supplementary element grafted onto the narrative; this is clear from the way the epilogue claims to recoup and fix the meaning of what has occurred. As Lyons observes, ‘the example is [etymologically] something cut out and removed from some whole. In this sense example is synonymous with a modern term that appears very different: detail’.<sup>28</sup> We might take this proposition a stage further by suggesting that the example in fact functions as a very specific type of detail — a *détail significativement non-significatif*,<sup>29</sup> representing the point in the narrative at which meaning is paradoxically cut out and yet is also constituted. The example as a detail in this text, then, is significant precisely because of its refusal to signify. A very similar presentation of the example as the proverbial sore thumb sticking out of the text can already be identified in Marie de France’s *Lais*, one of which, as we have already noted, provides a source for the *Chastelaine* poem.

The general prologue of Marie’s *Lais* begins by setting out an ethical duty to storytelling required of those who possess the divinely inspired gift of knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

Ki Deus ad duné esciēce  
E de parler bon’ eloquence

<sup>25</sup> ‘The Untellable Story’, p. 49.

<sup>26</sup> ‘The Art of Concealment’, p.139.

<sup>27</sup> ‘The Art of Concealment’, pp.139–40.

<sup>28</sup> *Exemplum*, p.9.

<sup>29</sup> The phrase is coined by Georges Blin, *Stendhal et les problèmes du roman* (Paris, Corti, 1954), p.12.

<sup>30</sup> The prologue to the *Lais* has attracted considerable critical attention. For a survey of the various treatments see Alexandre Leupin, ‘The Impossible Task of Manifesting “Literature”: On Marie de France’s Obscurity’, *Exemplaria*, 3 (1991), 221–42 (p.221 n. 1).

Ne s'en deit taisir ne celer,  
Ainz se deit volunters mustrer. ('Prologue', 1–4)

The imperative here is firmly against concealment, as is clearly underscored in lines 3–4 by the repetition of the verb 'deit' and the couplet 'celer'/'mustrer'. An organic conceit of the blossoming flower of disseminated knowledge not only stresses the aesthetic desirability of storytelling, but also embeds the practice firmly within the realm of Nature: telling stories is thus not only the 'correct' response to a moral injunction, it is also an inherently 'natural' thing to do:

Quant uns granz biens est mult oïz,  
Dunc a primes est il fluriz,  
E quant loëz est de plusurs,  
Dunc ad expandues ses flurs. ('Prologue', 5–8)

This contrasts starkly with the artifice that the narrative frame of the *Chastelaine de Vergi* attributes to those who make it their business to disseminate information (or to gossip)—compare the prominence of the term 'samblant' throughout that poem, and also condemnation of 'faus felons enqueereors' (957) in the epilogue.

However, the following section of Marie's prologue (9–22), in which she discusses the literary practices of the Ancients and how these have been passed on to modern writers, adds a certain opacity to the proclaimed openness in the practice of storytelling that was previously lauded.<sup>31</sup> The ideas set out by Marie in these lines of the prologue are not in themselves startling, yet they do sit somewhat uncomfortably with her earlier stress on the ethical duty to spread knowledge. The Ancients, Marie asserts, were in the habit of writing their books 'assez oscurement' (12), so as to test the intellectual mettle of those coming to their work in years to come, whose task it is to extricate the hidden or true meaning of the text, and thereby make their own contribution to the existing pool of knowledge, like dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants.

These are particularly Augustinian notions. In the *De Doctrina Christiana*, for instance, Augustine repeatedly praises the combination of obscurity and eloquence in scripture: 'the fusion of obscurity with such eloquence in the salutary words of God was necessary in order that our minds could develop not just by making discoveries but also by undergoing exertion'.<sup>32</sup> Rhetorical obscurity serves to 'cloud the minds of the wicked', ensuring that only

<sup>31</sup> The precise meaning of this second section of the prologue is far from transparent and continues to attract critical scrutiny. For comprehensive discussion of the reference to Priscian see Tony Hunt, 'Glossing Marie de France', *Romanische Forschungen*, 86 (1974), 396–418; Mary-Louise Zanon, "'Ceo testimoine Preciëns": Priscian and the Prologue to the *Lais* of Marie de France', *Traditio*, 36 (1980), 407–15; and Mortimer J. Donovan, 'Priscian and the Obscurity of the Ancients', *Speculum*, 36 (1961), 75–80.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. by R.P.H. Green (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995), 4:27; see also 2:10 (these references indicate a book number followed by the marginal numerations adopted by Green).



the truly pious have full access to the Holy mysteries.<sup>33</sup> This surely requires us to question the validity of a didactic literary text that preaches exclusively to the converted; the text appears to leave itself open to interpretation, yet that interpretation is already regulated and sanctioned by the text itself.

Marie de France can be said to be guilty of a similarly solipsistic approach to her own project in the *Lais*. Marie's storytelling enterprise involves the appropriation and glossing of other stories, the Breton folk tales which provide the inspiration and narrative material for her *remaniement*. In the lays of 'Milun' and 'Eliduc', Marie explicitly refers to the authors of her Breton source material as 'li auncien', thereby establishing a parallel between her own project and the practice set out in the prologue.<sup>34</sup> How, then, do Marie's texts engage with, reproduce, transform or distort their sources, and to what extent can Marie be seen to adhere to the paradigm set out in her prologue, the maxim according to which the task of the writer is to 'gloser la lettre/E de lur sen le surplus mettre' (15–16)?

However we interpret the problematic lines 15–16, of particular interest here is the notion of 'surplus', and especially so when we read the example as a narrative supplement, as proposed above.<sup>35</sup> Might it be possible to draw a parallel between the excessiveness of the example and the notion of a surplus 'sen' grafted onto these narratives by Marie in her reworking of the Breton material? The *Lais* as we read them supplement their source material in both senses of the term, both as a replacement/supplanting of the original, and as an addition to it. The term 'surplus', however, explicitly applied by Marie to mean an excess of meaning ('de lur sen le surplus mettre'), suggests a certain resistance, implying that the supplement/excess of meaning, which might be aligned with the example, somehow sticks out and draws attention to its own excessiveness: it is exactly *le détail significativement non-significatif*.

Only one of the twelve individual lays makes an explicit claim to exemplarity, although the moralizing or edifying tone of several others is indisputable. In 'Equitan', the story of the eponymous king's adulterous love for his seneschal's wife and the resulting deaths of the two lovers, the term 'ensample' is reserved for the gloss, the additional or surplus meaning derived by Marie from the source material:

Ki bien vodreit reisun entendre,  
Ici purreit ensample prendre:  
Tel purcace le mal d' autrui  
Dunt le mals [tut] revert sur lui. ('Equitan', 307–10)

<sup>33</sup> *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4:61.

<sup>34</sup> See 'Milun', 535–36; 'Eliduc', 1181–84. In 'Guigemar', the epoch during which the action supposedly takes place, presumably anterior to the recording of the lay by 'li Bretun', is referred to as 'tens auncienur' (26).

<sup>35</sup> See Hunt, 'Glossing Marie de France', for further discussion of these lines.

That the example is presented as a supplement — the narrator’s addition to the text — is made clear by the subsequent four lines with which the story closes, which serve as a kind of mini-epilogue, summarizing the content of the original Breton material, yet without offering any interpretative comment whatsoever on its potentially didactic value:

Issi avient cum dit vus ai.  
 Li Bretun en firent un lai,  
 D’Equitan, cum[ent] il fina  
 E la dame que tant l’ama. (‘Equitan’, 311–14)

The original Breton tale had already arrived at a satisfactory point of closure, but we see here how Marie has added her ‘vector of reception’ to this particular instance by positing it as an example. The narrative now projects beyond itself and insinuates a community of readers–listeners (‘Ki bien vodreit reisun entendre’) who can take the tale on board and interpret it as *exemplum*, ‘ensample’.

What, then, is the purpose of this narrative add-on, the surplus ‘sen’ grafted onto the material by Marie? It appears to function as a kind of stopper, providing the filler for certain narrative lacunae and thus lending the lays a degree of closure that they would otherwise lack. However, as we shall see, this function becomes enmeshed in the paradox of the example, ultimately preventing such closure of the text’s field of meaning.

Perhaps the most significant absence in the formal presentation of the *Lais* is that of a discrete epilogue giving closure to the collection and completing the narrative framework of which the general prologue provides only the half. As Sarah Kay notes, ‘each story seems self-contained and sufficient to itself and yet requires to be transmitted as part of a group’.<sup>36</sup> We are again reminded of the Aristotelian *epagoge*; the individual lay’s meaning relies heavily on its grouping together with other similar ‘stands’, a linking of part to part: ‘discovery came through the grouping of particulars in stands, which eventually resulted in direct awareness of their underlying principle’.<sup>37</sup> However, the underlying principle of the *Lais*, far from requiring intuition, has already been set out in the prologue, where the general tenets behind Marie’s storytelling project are laid down. In the absence of a formal epilogue to reiterate and confirm the supposedly intuited principles of the ensemble, it falls to the individual cases, to each lay as particular, to substantiate or else to undermine the aims of this project.

One of the organizing principles set out in the prologue is of course the open-ended, iterative practice of the storyteller, and indeed this could be

<sup>36</sup> *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford University Press, 2001), p.208.

<sup>37</sup> Hauser, ‘Aristotle’s Example’, p.178.

seen to be rehearsed by the *Lais* not only in their reworking of the already popular Breton material, but also in the omission of a conclusive epilogue from the collection. In spite of this, there remains a marked tension in Marie's texts caused by an underlying desire for narrative closure in each individual lay, signalling a critical departure from the principles expounded in the prologue. It seems that comparison of part to part, of lay to lay, in fact induces an altogether contrary unifying theme — that of a desire for closure in these texts. In order to illustrate this, I shall discuss the lay of 'Lanval', before returning to argue that the hermetic closure, or narrative plenitude, that Marie seeks to assert in her reworking of particular lays is very much at odds with the sentiments expressed in the prologue and the way in which Marie appears — or *fait semblant* — to respond to her own injunction. As in the *Chastelaine de Vergi*, the circuit between particular stands and their universal organizing principle malfunctions in Marie's storytelling enterprise.

The basic diegesis of 'Lanval', we recall, is very similar to that of the *Chastelaine de Vergi*: the narrative is constructed around a fundamental absence, caused by the unspeakable pact of love between the hero and his fairy mistress. As his fairy lover explicitly reminds Lanval, 'Nul hum fors vus ne me verra/Ne ma parole nen orra' (169–70). She is to remain fundamentally beyond the cognitive perception of anyone besides her lover; she is, to all intents and purposes, a nothing, a void.<sup>38</sup>

However, with a real stroke of luck for the hapless Lanval, the benevolent fay elects to put in an appearance at the climax of the lay, in what bears remarkable resemblance to a beauty pageant, with first one then another stunning otherworldly nymph parading herself before the goggle-eyed Arthurian court, thereby legitimating Lanval's claim to have a lover more beautiful than the queen. This lay, then, is the story of an absence made presence, of what was at first not there being made visible. This staging bears remarkable comparison with the positivizing function of the example in the *Chastelaine de Vergi*, where, by means of the text's proclamation of its own exemplarity, something is made of nothing.

If Lanval's otherworldly lover functions as the example, the detail cut out of narrative frame, then the resolution of that diegetic aporia — the climactic appearance of the fairy — demonstrates how it is, paradoxically, the very narrative excess that brings about closure: once the example against which to judge the queen's beauty is substantiated and the plaint settled, the tale can be brought to its conclusion. However, the rigid closure imposed upon this narrative is still far from unproblematic; 'Lanval' is unique amongst the lays in its recourse to the Arthurian

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<sup>38</sup> Or, as Kay has it, 'both secrecy and display can be analyzed[sic] as turning on *what is not there*' (*Courtly Contradictions*, p.202).

otherworld of Avalon as the locus in which the lovers find fulfilment: ‘Od li s’en vait en Avalun,/Ceo nus recurent li Bretun,/En un isle que mut est beaus’ (‘Lanval’, 641–43).

With the final couplet of the lay, the narrator attempts to skirt around this ambiguity with the assertion that ‘Null hum n’en oï plus parler,/Ne jeo n’en sai avant cunter’ (‘Lanval’, 645–46) and a similar formula is found at the conclusion of several other lays. Perhaps the most remarkably insistent occurrence of such tyrannical narrative closure comes in ‘Chaitivel’: ‘Ici finist, [il] n’i ad plus;/Plus n’en oï, ne plus n’en sai,/Ne plus ne vus en cunterai’ (‘Chaitivel’, 238–40). However, the narrative closure gradually undoes itself here, loosening from the firmly determined ‘[il] n’i ad plus’, to the suggestion that there *could* in fact be more to the story, but that this is excluded from the narrative frame, thereby asserting the ambiguous authority of the narrator: ‘Ne plus ne vus en cunterai’. Surely this uncompromising, but nevertheless compromised, attempt to impose narrative closure does not square at all well with the sentiment expressed by Marie in her prologue, according to which the act of storytelling should remain open-ended, so as to leave room for the ‘surplus’ which future reader–writers will bring to the text. Marie, it seems, wishes to expunge the ‘vector of reception’ from the future transmission of her texts, once, that is, they have been transformed and exemplified at her own hand.

Just as the act of naming in the *Chastelaine de Vergi* proved to be a gesture by which the problematic of the example was brought to the fore, so an obsession with names and naming in Marie’s *Lais* betrays an anxious attempt to assert narrative plenitude and textual veracity, but which in fact draws attention to the very lacunae that prevent successful closure in these short tales.<sup>39</sup> In the opening lines of ‘Milun’, for instance, the narrator grounds the narrative in the particular case of a baron, but admits that ‘jeo ne sai numer sun nun’ (‘Milun’, 22). Such a gaping cut in the fabric of the narrative contrasts with the opening lines of ‘Chaitivel’, where the text stakes its legitimacy upon an ability to name names: ‘L’aventure vus en dirai/E la cité vus numerai/U il fu nez e cum ot nun’ (‘Chaitivel’, 3–5).

Perhaps most telling of all, however, is Marie’s assertion of her own name in the prologue to ‘Guigemar’: ‘Oëz, seignurs, ke dit Marie/Ki en sun tens pas ne s’oblie’ (‘Guigemar’, 3–4). By thus making an example of herself, by preserving the act of naming, we might say, without repeating the lie of the name (and thus identifying herself — who, after all, was Marie?), the author of these tales ensures her inscription into literary posterity.

<sup>39</sup> On naming in the *Lais* see Matilda T. Bruckner, ‘Strategies of Naming in Marie de France’s *Lais*: At the Crossroads of Gender and Genre’, *Neophilologus*, 75 (1991), 31–40.

Finally, then, the comparison of part with part, such as we have performed by reading the *Lais* together with the *Chastelaine de Vergi*, can be used to demonstrate how the literary text's claim to exemplarity leaves itself open to deconstruction. At the very core of the problem is the tension between the necessary iterability of the example and its originality. This tension is conceptualized by Gelley as a 'tactic of exemplarity', in which the example as singular, unrepeatable one-off is placed in direct opposition with the contrary notion of the example as the paradigm which must be copied or aspired to. As Lyons stresses, 'the term *exemplum* reveals the importance of the idea of reproducibility in example, for *exemplum* denotes both the model to be copied and the copy or representation of that model', and therein lies the paradox with which we began, of the example which must necessarily differ from itself.<sup>40</sup> The circuit between the universal and the particular in the medieval texts dealt with here is not so much broken as it is shorted. The theory and practice of literary exemplarity is beset by *différance*; only once the 'vector of reception' has been suppressed, and the particular no longer projects beyond itself, can a narrative, paradoxically, assert a valid claim to exemplarity.

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<sup>40</sup> *Exemplum*, p.11.