

**LAYS OF MARIE DE
FRANCE. AND OTHER
FRENCH LEGENDS**

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Lays of Marie de France. And other French legends by Eugene Mason

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EUGENE MASON

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FRANCE. AND OTHER
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*EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,
and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side*



MARIE DE FRANCE

Born *circa* 1140, probably in Normandy.
Spent most of her life in England. Died
circa 1190.

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AND OTHER FRENCH LEGENDS

TRANSLATED WITH
AN INTRODUCTION BY
EUGENE MASON



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INTRODUCTION

THE tales included in this little book of translations are derived mainly from the "Lays" of Marie de France. I do not profess them to be a complete collection of her stories in verse. The ascription varies. Poems which were included in her work but yesterday are withdrawn to-day, and new matter suggested by scholars to take the place of the old. I believe it to be, however, a far fuller version of Marie's "Lays" than has yet appeared, to my knowledge, in English. Marie's poems are concerned chiefly with love. To complete my book I have added two famous mediæval stories on the same excellent theme. This, then, may be regarded as a volume of French romances, dealing, generally, with one aspect of mediæval life.

An age so feminist in its sympathies as ours should be attracted the more easily to Marie de France, because she was both an artist and a woman. To deliver oneself through any medium is always difficult. For a woman of the Middle Ages to express herself publicly by any means whatever was almost impossible. A great lady, a great Saint or church-woman, might do so very occasionally. But the individuality of the ordinary wife was merged in that of her husband, and for one Abbess of Shrewsbury or Whitby, for one St. Clare or St. Hilda, there were how many thousand obscure sisters, who were buried in the daily routine of a life hidden with Christ in God! Doubtless the artistic temperament burst out now and again in woman, and would take no denial. It blew where it listed, appearing in the most unexpected places. A young nun in a Saxon convent, for instance,

would write little dramas in Latin for the amusement and edification of the noble maidens under her charge. These comedies, written in the days of the Emperor Otho, can be read with pleasure in the reign of King George, by those who find fragrant the perfumes of the past. They deal with the pious legends of the Saints, and are regarded with wistful admiration by the most modern of Parisian playwrights. In their combination of audacity and simplicity they could only be performed by Saxon religious in the times of Otho, or by marionettes in the more self-conscious life of to-day. Or, again, an Abbess, the protagonist of one of the great love stories of the world, by sheer force of personality, would compose letters to one—how immeasurably her moral inferior, in spite of his genius—expressing with an unexampled poignancy the most passionate emotions of the heart. Or, to take my third illustration, here are a woman's poems written in an age when literature was almost entirely in the hands of men. Consider the strength of character which alone induced these three ladies to stray from the beaten paths of their sex. To the average woman it was enough to be an object of art herself, or to be the inspiration of masterpieces by man. But these three women of the Middle Ages—and such as they—shunned the easier way, and, in their several spheres, were by deliberate effort, self-conscious artists.

The place and date of birth of Marie de France are unknown—indeed the very century in which she lived has been a matter of dispute. Her poems are written in the French of northern France; but that does not prove her necessarily to be a Frenchwoman. French was the tongue of the English Court, and many Englishmen have written in the same language. Indeed, it is a very excellent vehicle for expression. Occasionally, Marie would insert English words in her French text, the better to convey her meaning; but it does not follow therefrom that the romances were composed in England. It seems strange that so few positive indications of her race and home are given in her poems—nothing is contained beyond her Christian name and the bare statement that she was of

France. She took great pride in her work, which she wrought to the best of her ability, and was extremely jealous of that bubble-reputation. Yet whilst this work was an excellent piece of self-portraiture, it reveals not one single fact or date on which to go. A consensus of critical opinion presumes that Marie was a subject of the English Crown, born in an ancient town called Pitre, some three miles above Rouen, in the Duchy of Normandy. This speculation is based largely on the unwonted topographical accuracy of her description of Pitre, given in "The Lay of the Two Lovers." Such evidence, perhaps, is insufficient to obtain a judgment in a Court of Law. The date when Marie lived was long a matter of dispute. The Prologue to her "Lays" contains a dedication to some unnamed King; whilst her "Fables" is dedicated to a certain Count William. These facts prove her to have been a person of position and repute. The King was long supposed to be Henry the Third of England, and this would suggest that she lived in the thirteenth century. An early scholar, the Abbé de La Rue, in fact, said that this was "undoubtedly" the case, giving cogent reasons in support of his contention. But modern scholarship, in the person of Gaston Paris, has decided that the King was Henry the Second, of pious memory; the Count, William Longsword, Earl of Salisbury, his natural son by Fair Rosamund; and that Marie must be placed in the second half of the twelfth century. This shows that scholarship is not an exact science, and that such words as "doubtless" should not be employed more than necessary. A certain Eastern philosopher, when engaged in instructing the youth of his country, used always to conclude his lectures with the unvarying formula, "But, gentlemen, all that I have told you is probably wrong." This sage was a wise man (not always the same thing), and his example should be had in remembrance. It seems possible (and one hesitates to use a stronger word) that the "Lays" of Marie were actually written at the Court of Henry of England. From political ambition the King was married to Eleanor of Aquitaine, a lady of literary tastes,