WOMEN HEALERS CROSSING GENDER
ROLE BOUNDARIES IN OLD FRENCH NARRATIVE

BY

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH STUDIES AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND
MAY 2009
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VITA

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a great pleasure to be able to thank the people who helped me in the process of finishing my doctoral dissertation.

This work would not have been possible without the help of my thesis advisor Michel-André Bossy who thoroughly and meticulously read and commented on countless drafts of my dissertation. Before attending several of Michel-André’s seminars and undergraduate courses, I had little knowledge about the French Middle Ages and his lectures and passion for his field of research inspired me to further examine and read about medieval French literature. I am very grateful to have had the chance to work with and be inspired by Michel-André and I am forever thankful for all his help.

I also offer my sincerest gratitude to my second reader, Virginia Krause who never seized to encourage me and with whom I spent many hours speaking about my research and my writing style. Finally, I would like to thank my third reader Amy Remensnyder for her patience and for her insightful comments during my oral defense. I was a pleasure to have had her on my committee.

I am forever indebted to my closest friends Sharon Larson, Laetitia Iturralde, and Adele Parker for their kindness, their encouragement and coaching. Sharon, Laetitia, and Adele read drafts of my work, helped me be more organized, and, many times, made sure I kept smiling in the moments when I felt most discouraged.

I am grateful to Gretchen Schultz, Sanda Golopentia, Lewis Seifert, Pierre Saint-Amand, Réda Bensmaïa for inspiring me and Annie Wiart, Youenn Kervennic and Stéphanie
Ravillon for their help. I would also like to thank the secretaries of the French Studies
department at Brown University for their assistance.
Lastly, and most importantly, I wish to thank my mother Mahi Zahedi, my brother
Sohrab Zahedi, and my father Farhad Zahedi for their love and support. To my mother I
dedicate this thesis.
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INTRODUCTION

“Et si les “marchandises” refusaient d’aller au “marché”? Entretenant entre elles un “autre” commerce? – Luce Irigaray

Studying medieval medical practice proves a difficult task because of the lack of documentation and because medicine was practiced and studied in a different manner. Examining women’s role in the medical milieu proves even more difficult. Historians of medicine observe that medieval annals do not represent the correct number of women practicing healing since most female practitioners of medicine lacked a professional title or affiliation.

The female healing practitioner of Old French literature helps shed light on women’s representation and their function within the genres of romance, dit, lai, and fabliau. The available data on women’s practice of healing and medicine shows a gradual evolution in the representation of these same practitioners. Their image slowly changes and they evolve from healer to witch, from helper-savior-curer to malignant murderer and poisoner. In 1943 Muriel Hughes wrote that within the domestic realm most women were familiar with the medicinal properties of herbs and basic empirical healing practices. Caring and curing were thus considered feminine attributes at the time and they helped define women’s nature. Yet, those healing practitioners who financially profited from their expertise and/or whose femininity was solely defined by their healing practice posed enough of a threat to be banned from medical universities, especially in France. The

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medieval female medical and healing practitioner embodies this paradox, which then invites us to question how women’s gender roles are constructed. Her activities helped define women, yet as soon as her skills provided her an unexpected amount of independence and authority she posed a threat to discourses that served to subordinate women to men.

In Old French literature, women healers appear considerably often. Peggy McCracken shows that these female characters are hardly provided a professional title or affiliation while male medical practitioners are often named “mire.” Conducting a comparative study of women healers’ roles in literature and history may not seem useful. Literature does not directly correlate with history especially when it comes to medieval romance; nevertheless, meeting points between literature and history can occur when we examine literary discourses on women and femininity. Contemporary religious and philosophical treatises have influenced Old French fictional literature. Because the healing practitioner of medieval literature often plays a minor role, modern scholars have tended to neglect her and to place greater emphasis on the works’ female heroine—the lady—and her relationship with the male characters. Women who play the role of healer generate a different perspective for the study of gender construction in medieval fictional works.

In troubadour lyric poetry and in Old French fiction, the lady, \textit{la domna}, and \textit{l’amie} contrasts with the male lover who is often the active subject of romance and

\footnote{McCracken first observes that in literature male healing practitioners are named “mire” regardless of their professional or university affiliation: “In medieval stories ‘mire’ may correspond to demonstrated or professional skills as well as to the kind of training the practitioner received. That is, male empirical practitioners who do not seem to have received formal academic training may be called ‘mires’ in literary representations of medical practice.” She then adds that the feminine term, “miresse,” is not used, however, for the female practitioners: “Although the form ‘miresse’ exists in Old French and is used to name women practitioners in historical records, in the world of romance it is largely absent” (45).}
medieval poems. The female beloved, as Simon Gaunt has suggested, can even be reduced to the status of a symbol masking the tie between lord and vassal, between troubadour poet and his male patron. As Micheline Dessaint has shown, the lady functions as mediator, as the driving force for the male knight: “L’ultime incarnation du médiateur est la Dame ou la Fée…La femme seule entraîne l’homme dans des contrées dont il ne sortira pas indemne, elle seule ayant le pouvoir de le transformer fondamentalement” (11). She stands as the emblem of femininity by defining women and simultaneously confining them to masculine discourses on them. Contemporary religious discourse most often speaks of men and women through a series of binaries that hierarchically posit men as superior to women and, according to these same discourses, men represent spirit and soul while women are associated with the body. Yet, oscillating between masculine and feminine gender categories, the healing practitioner shows an alternate perspective on gender categories while she also disturbs the traditional male-female binary. In most literary works, she does not play a major role within the economy of the narrative, and her life-span is often short-termed, yet she does appear in a significant number of works. In the following chapters I study how her representation contrasts and also correlates with the heroine’s representation. In addition to triggering a process of deconstruction of the patriarchal order, the healer generates the possibility of blurring the division between masculine and feminine categories. Following the motif of the healing practitioners in a selected group of fictional and non-fictional literary works leads us to two conclusions: she participates in triangulated structures of alliance and

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3 “The domna is less a mother figure through whom the poet negotiates his position with a father figure within an Oedipal narrative, than a feminine figure whose value is determined by her association with a man within a feudal hierarchy” (Gaunt 138).
relationship between herself, the heroine, and the knight-lover; at the same time, by her mere presence, she forces the author and the reader to reconsider representation and categorization of women.

The medieval society represented in romance and other fictional works illustrates both feudalism and Lévi-Strauss’ alliance theory. According to the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss every society has undergone a transition from nature to culture by imposing the incest taboo, a law that prohibits marriage or sexual activity between close relatives. Rather than marrying among themselves, kinship groups exchange their women, daughters and sisters, in order to build alliances. Marriage alliances allow tribesmen to provide protection for their tribe:

On’a pas besoin d’invoquer un apprentissage s’étendant sur des millénaires pour comprendre –selon l’expression vigoureuse et intraduisible de Taylor –qu’au cours de l’histoire, les peuples sauvages ont dû avoir, constamment et clairement devant les yeux, le choix simple et brutal “between marrying-out and being killed-out.” (Lévi-Strauss 53)4

According to this alliance theory, then, women function as commodities enabling interaction between men and rendering possible their kinship group’s survival. The transition from the state of nature to the state of culture thus happens thanks to the exchange of gifts and women—the most reliable and long-lasting commodity swapped between tribesmen. In her famous 1975 essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” the cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin examines the implications of Lévi-Strauss’ argument: homosocial bonding among men in any society apparently necessitates the use of women as commodified objects. According to Rubin, if Lévi-Strauss’ theory explains the transition from the state of nature to the state of culture

and to civilization, then questioning women’s status entails questioning how the initial transition came about. Other gender theorists have also followed Rubin’s steps and examined women’s role in the structure of alliance proposed by Lévi-Strauss. For example, the French philosopher and feminist author Luce Irigaray states that in tribal societies women can only function as objects or commodities and relationships between women are taboo since they may hamper the tribesmen’s attempt at building alliances. Irigaray concludes that, “ce que l’anthropologue désigne comme le passage de la nature à la culture revient donc à l’instauration de l’empire de l’hom(m)o-sexualité” since “femmes, signes, marchandises, sont toujours renvoyés pour leur production à l’homme…et ils passent toujours d’un homme à un autre homme” (Irigaray 168).

According to Irigaray and Rubin the state of culture thus necessitates male bonding. The theory of alliance proposed by Lévi-Strauss and revised by Irigaray and Rubin offers a frame for my analysis of the healer’s role. Lévi-Strauss’s structure of alliance often frames medieval romances, but the healer of the story temporarily undoes the initial triangulated relationship between two knights and the lady in order to introduce a different structure of relationship. In the legend of Tristan and Iseut, for example, King Marc of England marries the Irish princess Iseut in order to better his relationship with Ireland. Iseut’s mother, having reappropriated the male attitude towards women, sends off her daughter to England with a love potion that is meant to guarantee Marc and Iseut’s marriage. The love potion is the magical element that would allow Iseut to fall in love with Marc and vice versa. Iseut thus becomes the gift sent off to England to ensure that the alliance take place between the two regions. The triangle constituted by Marc, Tristan, and Iseut represents an instance of yet another triangulated system that leads to
women’s objectification: René Girard’s triangle of desire. In *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité* Romanesque, this social science philosopher uses several examples of well-known literary works to show that mimetic desire in human relations is universal. The woman love-object functions as a means through which men can imitate and thus come close to one another. That process of rivalry and imitation actually generates a tie between the two men rivaling for the same woman. For example, when he analyzes the love affair between Julien and Mathilde in Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Girard comments:

Tous les désirs intenses de Julien sont des désirs selon l’*Autre*. Son ambition est un sentiment triangulaire qui se nourrit de haine pour les gens en place. C’est aux maris, aux pères et aux fiancés, c’est-à-dire aux rivaux, que vont les dernières pensées de cet amant lorsqu’il pose son pied sur les échelles; ce n’est jamais à la femme qui l’attend sur le balcon. (43)

Girard believes that Stendhal’s Julien thinks more about his male rivals than about his love-object Mathilde. In the same fashion, in the Tristan legend, Iseut becomes the object engendering a tie between Tristan and King Marc. These types of triangulated relations can be found in troubadour poetry. Once again, Girard’s theory comes to confirm that women function as objects enabling men to generate bonds with each other. Within Old French romance, when men compete and fight with one another for the same lady and when one man offers another his daughter or sister they help in the process of transforming women into objectified exchangeable commodities or into mediums through which men show bravery and strength. Women become the means through which men survive within their society. In fact, women’s roles are assigned within a patriarchal system. Their sexuality and their reproductive function come to define their attributes, personality, and social status. They are either *pucelles, épouses, veuves, mères* or they

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5 “Loin d’être plus faible que le désir spontané, le désir mimétique est le plus fort, le seul désir vrai. Par un paradoxe étrange mais fondamental, c’est parce que ce désir est mimétique qu’il ‘sonne juste’ à nos oreilles” (Girard 13).
belong to a religious order and thus yet again follow Virgin Mary’s example to embody purity by remaining virgins. Within the context of romance, the lady, who is either pucelle, amie (amante), or épouse, becomes the woman par excellence since she helps establish ties between men at court. The woman healer, on the other hand, disturbs the ideologies that discourses on women produce. She puts into question the concept of woman because she is not defined by the male gaze in the same fashion as the lady.

Karen Newman proposes an alternative argument to Lévi-Strauss, Girard, and feminist and gender theorists who have perhaps, according to her, taken as a given the alliance theory and the theory of desire, The female healing practitioner of Old French romance serves as an example of how Newman proposes to de-essentialize the alliance theory. She sums up a list of arguments proposed against the alliance theory:

- Already in the late 40s, Simone de Beauvoir used Lévi-Strauss’ model in the Second Sex…Julia Kristeva has analyzed the exchange of women to dethrone woman as object of desire…Luce Irigaray pushes Lévi-Strauss’ model to its original extreme by describing the relations between men forged by the exchange of women as “hom(m)o-sexualité.” Among American feminists the paradigm has been enormously seductive, made accessible to many through Gayle Rubin’s powerful and influential essay, “The Traffic in women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” which named the paradigm of woman as object of exchange and analyzed it to theorize the sexual division of labor. (Newman 42)

The theorists who criticize Lévi-Strauss, Newman argues, curiously accept as a given his male exchange hypothesis in that they also assume the subject-object dichotomy to always correlate with the man-woman binary. As Newman observes, Luce Irigaray pushes the alliance theory to its extreme. She exaggerates to a hyperbolic degree women’s objectified status by comparing women to other objects in order to further reduce their value:
Tous les systèmes d’échanges qui organisent les sociétés patriarcales, et toutes les modalités de travail productif qui y sont reconnues, valorisées, rétribuées, sont affaires d’hommes. Femmes, signes, marchandises, sont toujours renvoyés pour leur production à l’homme (quand un homme achète une fille, c’est le père ou le frère qu’il “paie”, non la mère..) (Irigaray 168)

Resorting to the use of hyperbole and parody, Irigaray illustrate the dramatic reduction of women to objects by men and by masculine discourse. She exaggerates the exchange schema, involuntarily reducing women to the status of object. She does so, however, in order to render explicit that women mediate exchange among men. Yet, Newman criticizes this viewpoint because it hardens the man-woman binary and hampers women’s attempt at becoming agents and subjects directing exchange. The critic mentions Theodor Adorno’s essay *Subject and Object* which argues that in the nineteenth century, in the fields of sociology and anthropology, there came about a fashioning of ways to speak about humanity: “The anthropological and feminist analyses of the exchange of women are part of this enlightenment heritage—the shift that made ‘man’ a part of the natural world to be exploited and manipulated is displaced onto woman who, in the exchange paradigm, epitomizes the human being as object” (Newman 48). As noted earlier, the fact does remain that in most Old French fictional works the alliance theory applies in a way to show that most often women become objects enabling exchange between men. Yet Newman’s argument challenges us to question the permanency of theories like that of Luce Irigaray. Can women become subjects controlling not only their own destiny but also men’s destiny? Can they become subjects of exchange in a way both to render explicit their choice or, even, subjects exchanging men among them for alliance?

Newman’s argument ultimately asks us to find instances in which women do not merely function as object, to propose possibilities for reconstructing the object-subject binary.
Borrowing Adorno’s theory, she shows that women’s and men’s status can change within the binary: “Men are not always active subjects; sometimes they are objects of exchange themselves, and similarly, women participate as partners as well as objects in kinship systems” (Newman 49). She does not explicitly state that women can become subjects controlling exchange, but that they can “participate as partners” and thus voice their opinion about, and perhaps choice of, men exchanging them.

What does bonding, even minimal communication, between the woman healer and the lady of Old French literature entail? The triangle constituted by the lady, her lover, and the healer does not literally displace the initial structure of alliance that necessitates bonding between men. This secondary triangle does, however, temporarily generate a questioning of the primary structure, while it also allows women to intervene and play a more active role. In the words of Newman, they come to “participate” in the process of exchange so they can voice their choice to be exchanged. On one level, then, the healer disturbs the initial structure of alliance because through material and symbolic exchange she bonds with the lady of the narrative. Trust, recognition, and sympathy represent the symbolic elements and gifts, money, and the male knight-hero represent the material elements swapped between healer and the narrative’s lady-beloved. This exchange empowers both the healer and the lady so that the former becomes better recognized within the community of women, or materially benefits from the exchange while the latter gains more agency and more control over her destiny.

Yet, the healer and the lady are two distinct feminine personae. When the two characters are juxtaposed there appears a necessary questioning of the notion of woman. Eve Sedgwick states that the way in which gender and sex correlate depends on political
ideologies that use the correlation to maintain the status quo: “what counts as the sexual is, as we shall see, variable and itself political” (15). Sedgwick compares sexuality to ideology and claims that they have similar meanings. This way of thinking better explains how the woman healer stands in opposition to the female beloved in Old French romance. The healer almost plays a role similar to the drag performer who, according to Judith Butler, parodies masculine and feminine gender categories. Butler states that the person in drag shows the “imitative structure of gender” because “in the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (138). The drag performer thus automatically shows the performative aspect of gender, and shows that it derives from a series of elements that, through imitation, come to define one sex or the other. The healer, by her presence, also shows how femininity is a cultural construct. She does not embody a juxtaposition of two gender roles but rather she stands at the threshold of the categories of man and woman. She is indeed the “woman” healer, though her role reveals a disturbance of the category of woman. The healer deconstructs the category of “woman” in several ways. On the one hand, she stands in opposition to the lady and is not defined by her sexual relation with a male character. She is healer and not necessarily pucelle, épouse, veuve, or religieuse. On another level, she does not fit within the binary that correlates women to body and men to spirit and soul.6 The healer has a special kind of scientific knowledge that can also use for the benefit of women’s community. If, indeed, one considers women’s healing as both an art and a form of science that is perhaps not accessible to men, then how can medieval authors choose to use a female healer rather than a male healer without explaining the

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6 Semple, 164. Farmer, 520.
reason for their preference? Medieval authors borrow from folk tales in which healers play an important role. Nevertheless, in their representation of the healer, they seem to face the paradoxical situation of representing a figure outside of normative categories assigned to her.

The healer also disturbs normative gender categories especially when she practices herbal medicine outside of the domestic realm. Most female medical practitioners of medieval mythology belong to the domestic realm and healing appears to be passed on from mother to daughter and to chambermaid or servant. In the legend of Tristan, Iseut learns healing from her mother and the love potion is given from her mother to her chambermaid Brangien. Muriel Hughes’s 1943 book *Women Healers in Medieval Life and Literature* begins with two generalizations about women: “Much of the responsibility for the administration of medical aid in the Middle Ages fell upon the women. At home they nursed their families through all kinds of illnesses […] These duties fell so obviously within women’s sphere that they were naturally so accepted in much contemporary writing” (1). Hughes claims that caring and the domestic realm are elements that come to define womanhood. In *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women’s lives*, Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson present a counter-feminist perspective on care giving and its relation to women. As a response to the public-private binary argument, they propose that, “care giving transcends the bifurcation between public and private. Women perform similar care giving activities in the domestic domain

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7 They observe that for some care giving within the domestic realm by women goes hand in hand with the exploitation of women’s productive and reproductive functions. For others, however, care giving yields positive attributes for women: some feminists claim that “the intense involvement of many women in care giving activities suggests that they are not simply assuming assigned roles” (6). The authors’ statements show that even feminists who have taken on to examine why women are attributed the role of caregivers within the domestic realm take as a given that this role has been so assigned throughout time.
and the public arena” (6). The authors’ statement shows that even today care giving within the private or domestic realm is attributed to women. The healer of Old French literature can be seen as a type of care giver who uses her knowledge of herbs, magic, and medicine in both domestic and public realms and she breaks with Hughes’ view of the relationship between women and healing when she works for strangers and for financial and other forms of profit. The healer thus takes on a malleable shape and often transgresses gender categories and disturbs the traditional correlation between the male-female dichotomy and the chain of binaries associated with it in medieval religious and philosophical discourse.

It is for this same reason that women healers have historically suffered more from persecution than their male colleagues. In the thirteenth century, large cities in France become centers of medical knowledge. The Parisian medical school plays an especially important role in how medicine is studied and practiced in France. The gradual centralization of medicine generates more drastic hierarchical classifications among medical and healing practitioners. Medieval medical licensure was first introduced in 1140 in Italy. William Minkowsky in his 1992 article, “Women Healers of the Middle Ages: Selected Aspects of their History,” observes that in France women healing practitioners were more drastically excluded from the medical domain than in Italy or other neighboring countries:

But the university of Paris and its medical faculty in the 13th century were even less tolerant of female healers and of the much smaller number of male healers who lacked formal training in medicine. Royal and religious as well as academic decrees were promoted to restrict the practice of medicine to licensed physicians only. Because women were ineligible for the university training and minor clerical vows that were required of all candidates for licensure, the inevitable result of such legislation was to ensure that legal healing became a male monopoly. (293)
In the thirteenth century, the Holy Roman Empire’s Frederic II set standards for medical practitioners so that only those with recognized training could formally practice (Minkowski 293). In France, while many men could train in medicine, very few women had direct, or even indirect, access to the medical literature of the university. It would be erroneous to claim that only women were seen as threatening non-professional healers. Rather, women were more often seen as threatening, dangerous, and ignorant for the same reasons that they were denied proper medical training. Discourses on women found in religious texts and other forms of literature greatly influenced the greater segregation of female healing practitioners. A. K. Lingo in his article, “Empirics and Charlatans in Early Modern France: the Genesis of the Classification of the “Other” in Medical Practice,” lists a series of medical practitioners which in Early Modern France came under the category of the threatening and skeptical other. Women healers were targeted for abuse:

In the physicians’ diatribes against empirics, the woman healer and midwife became emblematic for the official male view of the empiric as the ignorant intruder into the official medical domain. This is not surprising if one remembers that the legal, ethical, medical, political, and theological underpinnings of western thought had a negative view of woman and her intellectual, social, and political capabilities. In brief, woman was inferior to man in almost every way and therefore unsuited or incapable of performing the same tasks or of having equal power. (593)

Twelfth-century texts present fewer examples of ill-natured women healing practitioners than do later ones. The healer of twelfth-century fictional works oscillates between malevolent witch and benevolent helper, yet she most often uses her knowledge of magic, herbs, and medicine to promote the lady heroine’s interests. In the thirteenth century,
malevolent healers are more prevalent, and writers depict them as dangerous, threatening, and independent beings. The transition from good to bad healer does not appear in every text of the later Middle Ages, though the figure of the ill-natured witch does appear more often. In other words, it is highly probable that the negative representation of women influenced medieval authors’ representation of the healer, though medieval texts do not directly reflect the university doctors’ attempt at monopolizing medical practice.

In the Middle Ages, women practice healing and medicine under several professional titles, though very few of professionally affiliated healers’ names can be found in the annals. William Minkowsky states that medieval healers practiced different types of healing: “women did perform varied medical functions beyond those of empiric and midwife; they served as physicians, apothecaries, surgeons, and barber-surgeons” (292). He adds that “evidence for their involvement in these more specialized areas of medical practice comes from the feminine ending of nouns descriptive of their healing work, from guild societies to which they belonged, and from legislation regulating their professional activities” (292). Historical records, then, allow us to claim that female professional care givers lived at the time and practiced healing in fashions similar to men. Social history does not, however, directly correlate with literature.

Very vast arrays of different types of female healing practitioners, or healers, make their appearance in Old French literature. The term “woman healer” encompasses this vast array of practitioners, from the famous mythological figures of Morgan, Mélusine, and the Lady of the Lake, to the anonymous healer-magicians, to the more spiritual healer-types exemplified by Virgin Mary, to herbal healers, medical practitioners, nurses, religious caretakers, and even to those women who simply heal
through their voice. Finally, within medieval poetry, women embody medicinal attributes. These women’s body can heal the love-stricken lover, can bring him back to consciousness. In these instances, women hardly function as healer and are rather reduced to an inanimate body with healing powers. Peggy McCracken is correct to state that these healers are hardly ever officially named a specific type of healer and texts blur the distinction between black and white magic so that they can be considered as simultaneously malevolent and benevolent.

Women healers of Old French fictional works are at the crossroads between mythological beings and practitioners of herbal and other forms of medicine that can be found in medieval medical texts. They exemplify how medieval texts bridge the gap between the past and the present, between old myths and writings and new ways of thinking. Medieval French fictions and other forms of tales borrow a great deal from Celtic as well as Greco-Roman mythology and also from the matière de Bretagne. In history and in medieval legends alike, one finds the type of healing passed on from one generation of women to the next. This healing will be called “traditional” because of its transmission, in the domestic realm, between different generations of women. This type of practice was mostly made up of the knowledge of herbs, incantations, and charms. In the Middle Ages, noble women tended to have a good knowledge of herbs and were skillful at administering traditional types of healing. Morgan, Iseut, and the Lady of the Lake exemplify the courtly women who were endowed with healing knowledge. Other women healers are not designated by a name, but are identifiable through their relation to other characters in the story. These women healers are represented as having fairy-like qualities. They are often, but not always, related to the main female character: they are
her sister, her chambrière, her maîtresse, her servant, her aunt, etc. In old French, the term “garir” means both to heal and to save, and the term well defines the function of the woman healer. She brings about salvation as much as she restores health. In relation to the male character, her healing is often both mental and physical: she heals the body, the soul, and the spirit. The focus here will be placed on the healer’s ability to physically heal the wounded knight or lady.

This dissertation’s opening chapter examines four romances by the twelfth-century author Chrétien de Troyes. Erec et Enide, Cligès, Yvain ou le chevalier au lion, Perceval ou le conte du Graal contain several healing scenes. Each of these scenes sheds new light on the author’s representation of women. Healing provides women a means through which they gain power and authority and show bravery. Healing also gives them a tool for protection. They build alliances with other women and they can exchange healing for men’s warrior skills, prowess, and their ability to protect them.

The second chapter turns to yet another well-known twelfth-century author: Marie de France. As withChrétien de Troyes, little is known of the author except that she names herself Marie and claims to be from France. Marie has written several important works, though this chapter only examines her Lais, and women medical practitioners appear in three of her lais. Healing, once again, brings together the community of women. As a woman writer, as an important persona possessing a considerable degree of authority, Marie repeatedly compares her role to that of the healer. Ultimately, the poet shows that healing, like writing, can generate a means of escape, a space of independence for both women healers and those women in whose lives they intervene.
In the anonymous thirteenth-century prose-verse romance *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the female protagonist Nicolette heals her lover Aucassin. The romance contains several possibilities for interpretation, and it has been read either as a parody of the romance as genre or as a simple love story. Healing appears as a theme both in the metaphoric sense found in troubadour poetry and in the literal sense. Interestingly, Nicolette is able to reappropriate the type of discourse that reduces her to an object with medicinal attributes for the male gaze. Healing thus helps her put into question men’s discourses about women and challenge the well-defined divisions between masculine and feminine gender categories reinforced by those discourses.

The fourth chapter looks into healers’ role in poems of the thirteenth century. First, in the fabliau *La Seineresse* the healer, a man disguised as a female blood letter, fools a bourgeois husband who claims to be cunning enough to decipher women’s trickery. Then, in his *Dit de l’Herberie*, Rutebeuf, the famous thirteenth-century poet, refers to the famous Salernitan female persona Trotula. The female healing practitioner of these two works blurs the categories of masculine and feminine. In Rutebeuf’s poem, Trotula appears as a monster and also as the source of knowledge of a quack herb merchant. She is depicted as a threatening and monstrous creature at the same time that she serves as a source of reference. In the fabliau, a male persona disguised as a female healer succeeds at gaining a bourgeois couple’s trust while at the same time cuckolding the husband under his own roof. The healer helps put into question the two gender categories because the bourgeois husband who initially claims to be smarter than the most cunning woman finds himself attracted to the healer.
In the final chapter, we look closely at another thirteenth-century work: Gerbert de Montreuil’s *Roman de la Violette ou de Gerard de Nevers*. The poem contains several healing scenes and different types of female healers, but two episodes stand out particularly because they are turning points in the narrative. In the first episode of the romance appears the healer-witch, who contrasts with the benevolent healer of the second scene so that in the author’s eyes healing takes on a moral dimension. The first character, Gondrée, works for the narrative’s lady Eurïant. When at court, the knight Gerard sings of his beloved Eurïant’s beauty and her faithfulness to him. A jealous knight, Lisiart de la Forest, challenges Gerard’s claim. The two knights thus wager their territory over Eurïant’s faithfulness or betrayal. When Lisiart visits Eurïant, his attempts at seducing her prove pointless. Gondrée, the lady’s chambermaid then proposes to help the knight if she can exchange intimate information about her lady for territorial gain. Gondrée does not perform healing, yet she is described as a healer-witch par excellence. She embodies the dangerous and threatening healer-type. At first Gerard believes Lisiart’s claim that his lady has betrayed him. Eventually, however, he realizes his mistake and makes his way back to her. On his return path he falls ill because of depression. He is rescued by a bourgeois and his daughter Marote. Refusing to eat or drink, Gerard rests at the bourgeois’ hostel. Marote then recites a song that retells the love story between a girl named Eurïant and her lover Renaud. Hearing his beloved’s name, Gerard wakes up and with Marote’s help regains strength. The bourgeois’ daughter heals him psychologically and physiologically so he is able to find Eurïant and ultimately marry her. Juxtaposing Marote and Gondrée, the author shows that independent healers can be selfish and can use their knowledge and craftiness to destroy lives and gain power. Like Rutebeuf’s *Dit*
and in the fabliau *La Seineresse*, Gerbert de Montreuil’s romance provides an instance of an anti-healer. These types of personae show the extent to which uncontrolled knowledge can pose a threat to the proper order of society.

In his historical study of marriage in the early Middle Ages, Georges Duby tells of King Philippe’s conflict with the church in 1095 because of his sudden desire to marry his close cousin. King Philippe repudiates his wife Berta of Holland because he falls in love with Bertrade de Monfort. When recounting in detail the king’s arguments with church authorities, Duby, for a short instance, focuses on the second wife in order to question her version of events:

Philippe seduisit-il cette femme? Fut-il séduit par elle? La prit-il par force? L’accueillit-il? S’entendit-il, ce qui est plus probable, avec son mari? Quel fut le geste qu’il fit, la part de ce que nous appelons l’amour? Je dois dire tout de suite, et très haut, que nous n’en savons rien, que personne n’en saura jamais. Car de ces gens qui vivaient en ce pays il y a près d’un millénaire, nous ignorons presque tout. (11)

The historian’s questions resemble the questions to which the woman healer provides possible answers in the Old French texts considered here. Medieval authors do not find it necessary to focus on voicing women’s opinion about their relationship with various male knights and kings. The healer, however, provides the possibility to see a temporary slowdown of the narrative so that focus can be displaced from the men to the women. Healers allow us to see whether the lady of the romance is taken “par force,” greeted, or whether she is even the seducer of the male hero. In addition to deconstructing traditional gender categories, the healer thus voices the heroine’s desire for her male lover.
CHAPTER ONE

The Role and Gender Representation of the Female Healing Practitioner in Chrétien de Troyes’ Arthurian Romances.

Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France represent twelfth-century authors of Old French fictional literature considered here. Chrétien, from the region of Champagne, inaugurated Arthurian romance writing and, from 1177 to 1190, composed several verse romances including Erec and Enide, Cligès, Yvain, and Perceval. He wrote for Marie de Champagne and, later on, for the Count of Flanders. To Chrétien are also attributed the poems Guillaume d’Angleterre and Philomena. The poet also makes reference to a tale of Tristan and Iseut that he has written, though no manuscript of this last poem has been found.

Determining Chrétien de Troyes’ opinion on women has proven a difficult task. Some critics, such as Roberta Krueger, have wondered whether Marie de Champagne influenced Chrétien’s representation of his female heroines and whether this influence makes of the author a feminist. Studying the representation of women healing practitioners does not provide a definite answer to this question, but rather allows us to question what is meant by the term “woman” and how femininity is constructed in Chrétien’s works. The healer plays a secondary, sometimes very minor, role in these

8 In her article “Love, Honor, and the Exchange of Women in Yvain,” Krueger argues: "If one woman reader or listener may have admired an idealized image of chivalry, another may have perceived the narrator’s critical analysis of a system which constrains both sexes” (6). In another article, “Desire, Meaning, and the Female Reader,” Roberta Krueger examines Chrétien’s Le Chevalier de la Charrette and how female desire is expressed in this narrative. Once again, in this second article, the critic puts into question the feminine court audience’s influence on Chrétien’s work.
romances, yet her presence allows the lady to voice her desire, to put into question her own function as object of exchange between the male characters.

Chrétien’s works contain a diverse array of healer types. In the author’s earliest work, *Erec and Enide*, appears the well-known mythological character of Morgan, King Arthur’s sister, as well as two “soeurs” of the dwarf Guivret who heal Erec in a castle called *Château de Pénuris*. The author does not specify whether the two healers are nuns or simply the dwarf’s sisters, though, because of the name of the castle, we can wonder whether the two female characters live in a sort of charity home type of place in which they temporarily welcome the poor and the ill. In *Cligès*, the healer-magician Thessala, described as being knowledgeable in the art of necromancy, plays a pivotal role and proves as knowledgeable as both local male doctors and visiting male physicians from Salerno. In *Yvain* reference is made to Queen Morgan, once again, since the Queen has given a lady a bottle of her healing ointment which this female character uses to heal Yvain. The lady and her maidens find the unconscious knight in the forest and one maiden heals him by rubbing Morgan’s ointment on Yvain’s body. A second healing episode occurs at the end of *Yvain*. The knight’s battle wounds are healed by the two daughters of a count. These women are described as performing surgery on Yvain. Finally, a healing episode appears in Chrétien’s final work, *Perceval*. This episode does not play a large role in the narrative’s economy, yet it is considered here because of the author’s remark that the healers are trained in a certain “école.”

In Chrétien's romances appears a recurrent theme: power, gained through bravery and strength. Women, especially the knight's lady, play a mediating role in order to enable their chosen knight to show his bravery, strength, and ultimately his power. Yet,
knights who have strength, a lady, and who are brave do not become powerful until they can demonstrate their courteous behavior. Power is indeed the key that gives him access to the courtly social milieu and these ties then further help him defend himself and his lady. By way of contrast, Chrétien often includes villainous knights who do not behave according to the courtly standards set up by King Arthur and his chosen knights. The emperor Alis in Cligès and Count Oringle in Erec et Enide, for example, represent these types of knights who fail to follow the courtly code of behavior. They obtain the lady without her consent. The main knight's love for his woman drives him to be brave, but, on the other hand, the villainous knights’ forced abduction of the lady of the story exposes their inability to build alliances.

The lady in Chrétien’s romances thus serves to oppose the benevolent, well-behaved hero to the villainous knight so that the main knight can outshine by his prowess and his faithfulness to his lady. Though strength and bravery are attributes that every knight should possess, courtly behavior and the knights’ behavior towards the lady help demarcate the hero from the other knights. The main difference between the two characters stems from the main protagonist's ability to build alliances. Both men prove to be brave and powerful, yet one imposes his will by force, while the other appears more passive and submissive in front of his lady. He is the defender of the female protagonist.

The term “alliance” is borrowed from Lévi-Strauss’ alliance theory, which emerges from the anthropologist's study of aboriginal and "primitive" societies. His observations allowed him to conclude that primitive tribesmen survived through

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9 “Surely one of the purposes of romance as “troped” narrative was to give to chivalric combat a new telos, in other words, to accelerate the transformation of twelfth-century chivalric conduct into class emblem entitling its bearer to become a lover of noble women” (Vance 47).

10 “During the twelfth century (when marriage also became a sacrament) free consent between legitimate partners became the sole basis of the marriage relationship” (Vance 46).
alliances. In order to gain power over their enemies, the members of the original tribe either ally with a second tribe and become stronger, or befriend their enemy, and both alliances take place through the exchange of women and commodities. Alliances give tribes power, and they protect them from further attacks.

According to the anthropologist’s theory, women are used as objects of exchange for the sake of protection and survival. In Chrétien’s romances, the lady does, indeed, function as the knight’s object of desire because she can generate political ties for the knight, for her family, or for her townspeople. As Eugene Vance argues, “if it is accurate to claim that woman in Western society (as elsewhere) is central to any system of exchange, whether as object of exchange or as medium of exchange (or both), the women in Chrétien’s romance are no exception” (50). The lady thus comes to mediate rivalry and alliances between knights and she helps generate homosocial bonds between men.

For the length of time that the healer appears and plays a role in the narrative, she helps to shift the focus from the knight to the lady. Healing and the female healers provide the ladies of Chrétien’s romances the possibility to reverse the power dynamic so as to gain agency. As a result, the lady no longer functions as object, but she temporarily takes on the role of subject enabling exchange, while the healer can help to generate the possibility for exchange. The knowledge, and practice, of medicine by women lends women a certain degree of power and authority and it can help generate the possibility for homosocial bonding between women.

**Cligès**

The romance of Cligès, written around 1176, contains one main love triangle. After the death of Alexander, his brother Alis, having promised that Alexander’s son
Cligès would rule after him, breaks his promise and becomes emperor of Constantinople. Cligès is still young and Alis indeed decides to reign, and he marries Fénice, the princess of Germany. Cligès is also betrayed by his uncle for a second reason because he fights for the emperor of Germany in order to rescue Fénice from a forced marriage, and he falls in love with the princess, yet Alis chooses to marry her. The healer Thessala, plays a pivotal role in this narrative because she helps the couple undo Alis’ unjust intervention.

Alis, Cligès, and Fénice are part of a main love triangle that sets the narrative in motion. Yet, there also exist a series of secondary, and provisional, triangles that exemplify rivalry between men for the love of one single woman and all the men rival for Fénice. She helps generate bonds between the men around her, since triangles shaped by marriage alliances, or by adulterous relationships generate ties between men. According to René Girard, men competing for the same love-object, or for the same female beloved, come to resemble one another, and this common love-object becomes a means to an end, a way for men to compete, to bond, to interact, with each other. But, the female healer, Thessala, intervenes to introduce the possibility to imagine a different kind of bonding. Her intervention is, indeed, tantamount to the successful plotting of an escape for Cligès and Fénice and, thanks to her, the love triangle between Alis, Cligès, and Fénice gives way to a new triangulated relationship between Thessala, Fénice, and Cligès.

Furthermore, the healer’s knowledge of medicine, magic, and herbal healing practices, provides her with a certain power over the community of men, especially over male practitioners of medicine.

The main love triangle echoes the one found in the tale of Tristan between Marc, his wife, and his nephew. Fénice, the emperor Alis' wife, becomes Cligès' beloved, and
Cligès is the emperor’s nephew. According to critics, the tale of Cligès has been written as a response to the legend of Tristan and Iseut. Robert Levine states that “Chrétien seems to have attempted to moralize the Tristan-story; his moralistic reduction of the complex, amoral sexuality of the story produces a series of incidents which resemble perverted Oedipal fantasies” (210). Other critics have interpreted the Tristan-like love triangle in Cligès through the lens of psychoanalysis and Freudian definition of incestuous relationships.

As mentioned previously, in Cligès, there appears a Girardian love triangle. Alis breaks his oath and takes the throne from his nephew and marries Fénice, the daughter of the emperor of Germany. The story revolves around Cligès and Fénice’s attempt at being united. The couple’s relationship strengthens Cligès’s attachment to Alis’ court and generates an intense relationship between uncle and nephew. As in the Tristan legend, the love triangle resembles an oedipal situation of incest, though the male characters are related as uncle and nephew rather than father and son. Claude Sahel, in his examination of the relationship between Marc and Tristan, questions whether Iseut functions as a mere object hiding the homoerotic bond between uncle and nephew. The same question can be asked about the relationship between Cligès and Alis. Ultimately, both male figures seek to become emperor. Fénice then plays the role of mediator, encouraging Cligès to react and fight for his right to the throne. Fénice also functions as the means through which the correct order of events returns at the end of the narrative. Alis does, indeed, rob the throne from Cligès, but Cligès then steals Fénice’s heart and ultimately this advantage allows him to become king.

11 “In Cligès, Chrétien de Troyes so radically revises the Tristan legend that it has been taken for a neo-Tristan if not an anti-Tristan” (Baldwin 809).
In *Cligès*, Fénice represents the woman as exchangeable commodity. When the emperor Alis fights at the side of the emperor of Germany, he does so because he intends to marry the emperor's daughter. Cligès fights at the side of both emperors because he also has an interest in Fénice. Furthermore, the German emperor's enemies also fight for their desire to possess Fénice. Though it seems that these men want to marry her out of love, one would be mistaken to read the situation in this way as it plays itself out. All parties in the affair have political reasons for wanting Fénice and the relationship between each knight-lover and Fénice is indeed mediated through the presence of a male figure. Kathryn Gravdal suggests that Fénice serves to emphasize Cligès' prowess:

In *Cligès*, Chrétien leads us through a tangled series of ravishments: abductions, contrabductions, false abductions. As objects of exchange, noblewomen test the military strength of kingdoms. Chrétien spins a tale in which the heroine’s body is pulled from leader to leader, marriage to marriage, thus enabling the young and untried Cligès to prove his heroism. The violence of exchanges is rendered misty by the depiction of Fenice’s passionate love for Cligès, her final ravisher. (575)

Gravdal, while studying rape and sexual violence in Chrétien de Troyes’ romance, lists the number of times Fénice is abducted then rescued, thus passed back and forth, among men (Gravdal 574). Through the double meaning of the term *raptus*, Gravdal argues that in this romance as in the rest of Chrétien’s works, rape functions as a means of showing male heroism, and as a means to distinguish noble knights from other characters. Fénice is thus seen by Gravdal as the object enabling knights to foreground their strength, bravery, and heroism. Rape and capture go hand in hand for Gravdal and thus women’s inevitable attractiveness becomes a means by which men compete with one another. Fénice does, indeed, help generate rivalry between men so as to show who is the most heroic among them. The bravest of all rivals proves to be Cligès. This protagonist wins
Fénice not by force, but through love and consent. At the same time, however, the story unfolds so as to let us believe that Cligès only wins her because he has the moral and political right to her and to the throne.

The emperor Alis comes to represent the most powerful villainous knight of the narrative. The love triangle between uncle, uncle’s spouse, and nephew foregrounds other triangulated relationships present in Cligès. The relationship between uncle’s spouse, nephew, and healer plays an essential role, however, in maintaining a healthy bond between uncle and nephew. Iseut, in the Tristan legend, has an adulterous relationship and has intercourse with her husband and her lover.13 In Chrétien’s Cligès, thanks to Thessala, Fénice has intercourse with her husband only after her affair with her lover. Regardless of the reason for which Alis is given a magic potion that prevents him from being the first to deflower Fénice, the fact remains that because of that episode, Thessala comes to play a prominent role. The healer becomes an important character when Fénice falls in love with Cligès.

If, in the twelfth century, marriage can only take place with both parties’ consent, then how can one know for a fact that the beloved also wishes to marry the chosen husband?14 Fénice’s silence and her anxiety result from her entrapment into marriage with Alis. Before she gains courage and expresses her feelings to Cligès, she finds herself obligated to seek Thessala’s help and advice. At first, Fénice is afraid to confess her situation to anyone:

13 “Fénice refuses to submit to the apparently adulterous situation and separate heart from body as did Iseut” (Baldwin 809).
14 “As for marriage, previous to the mid twelfth century, that relationship had been determined previously not by the exercise of free consent between partners, but rather by exterior considerations such as the acquired privilege of a man to possess a woman, or else by such factors as cohabitation or consummation” (Vance 45).
S’en est angoisseuse et destroite,
Car de celi qu’ele covoite,
Ne se set a cui conseiller
S’en penser non en veillier. (2943-2946)

Ten lines later, Thessala appears and is introduced as the heroine’s *nourrice, maîtresse,* and as a magician-healer:

Sa mestre avoit non Thessala
Qui l’avoit norrie d’enfance,
Si savoit molt de nigromance.
Por c’estoit Thessala clamee
Qu’ele fut de Thessaile nee,
Enseigniees et establies,
Car chares et charmes font
Les fames qui dou pais sont. (2956-2964)

When Thessala appears in the narrative, the triangle between uncle, spouse, and nephew displaces the one between the lady, the *maîtresse,* and the lady's lover. We are then provided a short biography about Thessala and told of her skills at “nigromance.” Her name, Thessala, stems from the name of her native region, Thessalie, and it thus encompasses the art of magic, healing, and charm for which women of that area are known. Thessala represents the prototype of the women of Thessalie and, as a result, she embodies women’s paradoxical attribute as untrustworthy according to men and yet as trusted by other women. Only the women of the region practice, and are known for, their knowledge of charms and magic. This detail, which implies that women are untrustworthy and mischievous, derives from familiar misogyny. All the blame for the illicit relationship between Fénice and Cligès is thus placed on the two women’s skill at
conspiring. In her time of despair, Fénice turns to Thessala as her trustworthy friend and caretaker. The healer creates the possibility of changing the heroine's life and role.

Her trust in her maîtresse is then answered by the healer’s important intervention and by her planning of the couple’s escape. When the two women conspire to “heal” Fénice’s love wound, they establish a strong bond between them. Though this bond remains homosocial, some passages let us wonder about the nature of the two women’s relationship. Fénice depends upon both Cligès and Thessala for her survival, and at times it is ambiguous which of the two is more detrimental to her health and happiness. In a short passage, Fénice swears to only seek the healer's help and advice:

"Tant m'avez fait que mol[t] vos aim. 
de toz mes mals a vos me claim 
ne je n'en preg allors conseil." (5353-5355)

Fénice literally puts her life in the hands of her helper, since she lets her give her a potion that makes her appear dead. The text plays with the literal and metaphorical life/death binaries. As a result, the heroine ties Cligès to Thessala, to the point of rendering them rivals for her trust. During the first episode in which the heroine feigns to be dead, the emperor Alis offers her to be seen by doctors. Fénice refuses on the grounds that only one person can cure her of her illness:

Et mire querre li envoie,  
Mes ele ne velt qu'an la voie  
Ne nes a soi adeser.  
Ce puet l'empereor peser  
Qu'ele dit que ja n'i avra  
Mire fors .I. qui li savra  
Legierement doner santé

15 "The association of feminine weakness and seduction with the power of persuasion sometimes suggests an inherent distrust of spoken language. This was indeed the case in monasteries, where monks were supposed to keep silent. Like women and the devil, spoken language had the power to entice the monks away from their silent conversation with God”(Farmer 539).
Quan lui vendra a volenté.
Cil la face morir ou vivre,
En celui se met a delivre
De sa santé et de sa vie.
De Deu cuidoent que ele die,
Mais molt a autre entention,
Qu'ele n'entent s'a Cligès non,
C'est se[s] Dex qui la puet garir
Et qui la puet fere morir. (5623-5638)

Designed for Fénice by Thessala, the escape plot blurs the difference between life and death and encourages the tale’s readers to further ponder that difference. Ultimately, then, as readers we are to wonder about the role of the person who can save Fénice. Thessala is sought for treating the heroine and yet Fénice speaks of Cligès as her sole savior while the emperor thinks she is referring to God. Then, in a self-reflexive move, the text draws a parallel between Cligès and Thessala for the knight is the lady's figurative "mire" and Thessala her literal "mire.” The knight and the healer bring salvation but in different ways: spiritual in one case and physical in the other. Cligès' role in keeping her alive or letting her die is mentioned twice in the above passage: we are told that her lover is "Cil [qui] la fait morir o vivre" (5631) and, at the end of the passage, the term "morir" rhymes with "garir", which in Old French has both meanings of salvation and return to health. Chrétien plays on the ironic situation in which Fénice finds herself: Thessala gives her a potion so she can feign death, and the reader can wonder at Fénice's true feelings, since in the end, she remains at the threshold between life and death.

Cligès can cure her with his love, and he is a metaphoric healer. When Thessala intervenes and saves her from life and gives her health, however, she does so in the literal sense. Perhaps this juxtaposition of the two roles of Thessala and Cligès can be explained by Chrétien's attempt at creating a stereotype of women as cunning plotters who use
double-entendre in order to hide the truth. Levine asserts that “abhorrence of female sexuality, as Paris suggests and as M. Györy elaborates, is a central element in Cligès” (210). Fénice states that only one person can rescue her. The audience at court assumes she is referring to God, and Chrétien lets the readers know that she is speaking of Cligès, but, ironically, her true savior is Thessala. The narrator thus hides Thessala's talents and her medical knowledge behind Cligès' bravery and behind the codes of courtly love.

Once Fénice begins to fall ill, Thessala acts as a true medic and designs the lovers’ escape plot so as to render credible the protagonist's death. Besides Thessala, another secondary character plays a crucial role in the episode of the couple's escape. Cligès resorts to the help of Jean, a stonemason, who offers to hide the couple in his tower and to build a tomb, while the healer agrees to concoct a potion so that Fénice may appear dead. The couple then intends to flee for Brittany together and to live at King Arthur's court.

While all four characters cooperate to plot the escape, Thessala concocts the means of their escape. Her scheme unfolds in three steps. The first is to drug Alis in order to preserve the heroine's virginity temporarily. Then she renders Fénice sick so that she can feign death. Finally, she heals Fénice and restores her health. Each step adds intertextual reference to other tales in which women find themselves facing similar dilemmas and problems within marriage. For example, the first step links Fénice to Iseut, and makes of her one who learns from her predecessor’s experience and does not repeat her mistakes. The second and third steps echo the tale of Solomon's wife. The intertextual reference thus enables the narrator to compare his heroine with the other female
protagonists. Ultimately, she appears as more crafty, more virtuous, patient, and skillful than her predecessors.

Once Fénice begins to fall ill, she orders that no one approach her. Thessala becomes the only person allowed near her. Even Cligès can only visit her for a short period of time. When Alis offers to seek court doctors' help for her, she says that only one person, referred to as "cil" can bring her health. Yet, when Cligès returns from his trip to the tower with Jean, he is disappointed to learn that he can spend very little time with Fénice:

A dit en haut: "Fuiez, fuiez!
Trop me grevez, trop m'ennuiez,
Car si sui de mal agravee,
Ja n'en serai saine levee." (5609-5612)

Even though Cligès has been informed of the plot, Fénice's reaction to his visit suprises him and chagrins him. By throwing him out of her room, Fénice undoes her first statement that only he, or "cil," can restore her health. We are told that Fénice acts in a way to fool those at court, but her words both connote and denote that his stay will be detrimental for her. If he extends his visit, the people at court may catch them, and since he is not her doctor, his prolonged stay would be of little use to her in this second sense as well. The lady then only puts faith in Thessala. The two women plot her escape from her initial marriage, while the knight Cligès, rather than bravely going to war against his uncle, patiently waits for the two women to plot their escape. The juxtaposition of Cligès and Thessala as two characters who can save Fénice from death generates an implicit rivalry between them for Fénice's trust. That the heroine's statement remains paradoxical and ironic is further proven by her seeking Thessala's help immediately after she is rid of
the effects of the healer's second potion. After she revives, she finds Cligès, whom she
tells to bring Thessala as soon as he can:

"Amis, amis, je ne sui pas
Del tot morte, mes poi s'en faut.
De ma vie mais ne me chaut.
Je [me] cuidai gaber et feindre,
Mes or m'estuet a certes plaindre.
Car la mort n'a soig de mon gap.
Merveille iert se vive en eschap,
Car molt m'ont li mire blecie,
Ma char rompue et depecie.
Et neporquant, s'il poet estre
Qu'avec vos fust çaienz ma mestre,
Cele me feroit tote sainne
Se valoir i puet nul[e] peinne." (6188-6200)

Once again, there is a play on the distinction between life and death, between those who
are fatal to the heroine's life and those who are able to save her. The "mire" or male
doctors from Salerno have tortured her to the point that she is nearly dead, while her
"mestre" or caretaker will give her health and life. At the end of the narrative, the
life/death binary parallels the murderer/savior dichotomy. Cligès is both the one able to
save Fénice and the one capable of bringing her death. Thessala uses potions and her
knowledge of magic and medicine to first enable Fénice to feign death and then to revive
her from her coma. While uniting with Cligès becomes Fénice's ultimate wish and her
goal, Thessala plays a prominent role as mediator, as the person enabling her to reach that
goal.

As the person able to give her life or snatch it away, the healer thus becomes the
person able to give her Cligès or take him away from her. An important exchange takes
place between two women: Cligès is the object traded. Fénice fully trusts Thessala and, in
return, the healer uses magic, and medical knowledge, to help her lady unite with the
chosen lover. While the distinction between masculine and feminine gender roles comes to the forefront, the fact remains that the two women's collaboration provides them more power within the community. The text then casts an ironic look at women and critiques them for their cunning nature while, at the same time, generating the possibility for imagining a positive outlook for women who collaborate with each other.

In the first instance, as Fénice's illness advances, her entourage becomes reduced to Thessala alone. In the end, Thessala becomes the heroine’s sole savior, curer, and she is compared to the emperor’s male doctors and to Salernitan physicians. The emperor suggests, indeed, that male doctors examine his wife, but Fénice forbids everyone to approach her. Acting in a way similar to contemporary male doctors, the healer borrows a urine sample from a dying woman and gives it to the emperor’s doctors in order to fool them:

Li mire viennent en la sale,
L'orine voient pesme et male,
Si dist chacuns ce que lui semble
Tant qu'a ce s'acordent ensemble
Que ja mais ne respassera,
Ne ja nonne ne passera,
Et si tant vit, lors au plus tart
En perdra Dex l'ame a sa part. (5669-5676)

The group of doctors who examine the heroine's urine contrast with the woman healer and they appear less knowledgeable and competent since they are fooled into believing that the heroine is about to die.

To render more explicit the competition between Thessala and male doctors, Chrétien includes another group of doctors, more expert in medicine than the first group, but who are also unable to see through Thessala's artifice. A group of physicians from Salerno accidentally visit the town and, hearing about Fénice’s death, remember the tale
of Solomon. According to the physicians, Solomon’s wife had feigned death to escape
from her husband. Their suspicions aroused, the physicians thus become curious and ask
to examine Fénice's body. Because they are unable to determine her death by pure
observation, they inflict severe pain on her: they burn her and strike her repeatedly until
she bleeds. The women of the town, however, peeking through and witnessing the
doctors’ actions, break down the door to Fénice’s room and rescue her:

Granz fu la noise et li asauz
A la porte brisier et fraindre.
S'or poent les mires ataindre,
Ja lor sera sanz atendue
Tote lor deserte rendue.
Les dames entrent el palais
Totes ensemble a un eslais,
Et Thessala est en la presse
Qui de nule rien n'est engresse
Fors qu'a sa dame soit venue.
Al feu la trove tote nue,
Molt emperie et molt malmise.
Ariere en la biere l'a mise
Et desoz le paile coverte.
Et les dames vunt lor deserte
As trois mires donner et rendre.
N'i voldront mander ni atendre
Empereor ne seneschal,
Par les fenestres contreval
Les ont enmi la cort lanciez
Si qu'a toz trois unt pecieiez
Cols et costez et braz et jambes. (5948-5969)

The doctors' attempt at demonstrating women's treachery generates more anger from the
community of women. Without the help of male figures such as the "emperor" or
"seneschal," the women avenge the empress. When Fénice revives, she informs Cligès
that she nearly died under the hands of male doctors. The life/death binary appears once
again, and it parallels with the female/male doctors binary. Fénice thus functions as
scapegoat so far as she generates unity and collaboration among women. She helps strengthen bonds among women.

Bravery, power, and the ability to build alliances are attributed to women thanks to the intervention of Thessala. Alis functions as the villainous knight who further emphasizes Cligès' virtue, his right to the throne, and his courage. Iseut and Selme, Solomon's wife, appear in order to emphasize Fénice's virtue, her right to marry Cligès, her patience, and her strength. While Selme's treachery is deciphered by male doctors, Fénice's ruse remains a mystery even for Salernitan doctors thanks to her great helper Thessala. Just as Cligès learns to act in opposition to Alis, Fénice learns to go farther than her intertextual predecessors. Fénice's close tie with Thessala provides her the strength and the means to become an active subject controlling her choice for marriage.

In the medieval German version of the tale of Solomon, Queen Selme's lover gives her a medicinal herb that allows her to feign death. In Chrétien's narrative, on the other hand, Fénice resorts to the help of a more powerful figure, Thessala. Chrétien borrows medieval discourses about women that describe them as untrustworthy and cunning when he creates a heroine who resembles Queen Selme and Iseut and at the same time appears craftier than her predecessors. Fénice is able to survive and avoid being caught thanks to Thessala, a female healer and helper who is at the threshold between a witch-magician and a healer-doctor. For a short period of time, while the two women collaborate, the lady, Fénice, voices her desire to be with Cligès. The triangle thus constituted by the two women and Cligès brings about a questioning of whether both Cligès and Fénice at some point come to play a more passive role and to function as objects enabling alliances to come about between others. Just as the heroine becomes a
love object for men and fosters bonds between them, the hero turns into Fénice’s object of desire and fosters an alliance between the lady and the healer.

**Erec and Enide**

Chrétien's romance *Erec and Enide* contains a series of triangulated relationships that generate progression within the narrative. In fact, Erec and Enide's marriage suffers from Erec's desire to fight off potential rivals for Enide's love. Once he is told by his wife that people undermine and question his bravery, Erec decides to go on a hunt for, and fight with, those knights daring enough to want to claim Enide for themselves. The instances in which Erec shows his bravery help to construct triangles between himself, Enide, and his rival. These relationships allow Erec to be accepted in the society of men, and Enide becomes the means through which he can boast of his skills as a knight. Once again, the lady assists in foregrounding her knight-lover's prowess and virtue.

Women healers play a minor role in this narrative. The text contains one short reference to Queen Morgan's knowledge of healing and magic, and one episode in which two female nurses heal Erec's wounds. Enide also takes care of her lover's wounds before he is left in the care of the two nurses. Yet, only once, when the nurses appear in the narrative, can one perceive that a new triangle is complementing the initial traditional triangulated relationship.

Throughout the narrative, Erec tests his own bravery while testing his wife’s ability to be obedient. Erec wins the ultimate challenge when he defeats his own friends at court during his incognito encounter with them. Erec fights against both Kay and Gauvain, and for his prowess, Gauvain becomes curious to know his name. Once he is told that he has been fighting Erec his friend, Gauvain lets the king know, and Arthur and
those surrounding him camp closer to where the two knights are speaking. They trap Erec out of affection for him, and he feels obligated to spend the night near them.

King Arthur takes notice of the gravity of Erec's wounds and he proposes to use his sister Morgan's plaster in order to cure Erec within a week. Jean-Marie Fritz states, "Morgue ou Morgain ou Morgane, qui sera plus tard une fée maléfique hostile au chevalier (Lancelot en prose) est chez Chrétien de Troyes essentiellement guérisseuse" (329). Morgan is mentioned as the healer par excellence, the source of magical, herbal, concoctions and potions of Arthurian literature. She represents a knowledgeable and benevolent healer, while in thirteenth-century literature her image changes, she is rather represented as a malevolent witch.16 Chrétien de Troyes appears here to consider Morgan a benevolent healer, yet he only makes reference to her and hardly provides any information about her knowledge of magic or medicinal herbs.

_Erec and Enide_ contrasts with _Cligès_ in that its healer characters play important but very minor, almost inconsequential roles. In _Cligès_ Thessala plays the only healer and her role remains rather important. In _Erec and Enide_, however, Morgan appears only as a reference made by King Arthur and the two sisters of the second healing episode are not endowed with a name. Healing plays a small role within the economy of the narrative, but its presence does remain important to the couple’s adventure.

By refusing Arthur’s offer of Morgan’s plaster, Erec shows his prowess and his strength. He lets his friends at court know that he chooses to pursue with his adventures. In addition to this initial reasoning, there appears a second reason for which Erec does not

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16 Thelma S. Fenster says that Morgan first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s _Vita Merlini_ and that she heals Arthur’s battle wounds. It is only in Chrétien’s romances that she becomes Arthur’s sister. Fenster also comments on Morgan’s changed image in thirteenth-century literature: “In the French prose romances of the thirteenth century, Morgan’s image suffers a decline. She becomes treacherous, wishing to harm Lancelot and Guenevere, Arthur, and Tristan by turns” (Fenster xxxi).
choose to be cured at the beginning of his adventures. The second healing episode appears at a turning point within the narrative and it helps demonstrate not only Erec’s prowess but also Enide’s faithfulness to her husband and lover.

The second healing episode comes towards the end of the couple's journey and it represents the ultimate test for Enide. After Erec fights with and kills two giants, he loses strength and faints in front of his wife. As she weeps over his stricken body and attempts suicide, Count Oringle appears and dazzled by her beauty, forces her into marrying him. During their wedding feast, Enide refuses to eat, stating that she will only eat once they feed Erec. Presumed dead by members of Count Oringle’s court, Erec suddenly wakes from his coma, rescues his wife and the couple flees from the castle. During the night, Enide takes care of Erec's wounds.

The healing scene appears after Erec revives and the couple is rescued by the dwarf Guivret. Count Oringle represents the final step on the couple’s journey. Throughout the romance, Erec shows his prowess by defending and fighting for Enide rather than remaining idle.17 In the beginning of the romance, Erec is described as an exceptional knight because of his beauty, his prowess and his nobility.18 In this final episode, there appears a love triangle between the count and the already married couple. Because the count assumes Erec dead, he forcefully marries Enide. Enide can only rebel against the count by fasting. She states that she will not eat so long as Erec is not given any good. Because both knights seek to keep the lady, they put forth their prowess and, in

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17 “Parsing Chrétien’s play on los demands of his readers a sense of the relationship between honor and time, that constant, guilty itch reminding both audience and character that honor, like sand in an hourglass, dissipates in the flux of minutes expended idly in love and talk” (Heyworth 110).
18 “Erec is defined as a knight from the Round Table, a man of great reputation at court. In a community of exceptional individuals he has the ability to stand out above the rest...His three fundamental qualities and attributes are prowess (preuz), nobility (genz) and beauty” (Burgess 19).
the end, Erec wins despite the fact that he is nearly fatally wounded and weak. The narrative presents a juxtaposition between Count Oringle and Erec in order to better highlight the latter’s qualities as knight and lover.19 The dwarf Guivret then takes the couple to the Château de Penuris. Erec is placed in the hands of his two sisters who treat him. The scene in which appear these two nurses follows the part of the narrative in which we witness the disintegration of a first triangular relation. Enide is thus torn between one husband who has fainted, and one who is forcing her into marriage. She allows Erec to prove his bravery at the moment that we think him dead. The malevolent Count Oringle represents the prototypical villainous knight.

Guivret is the king of the country in which the couple is traveling. In a previous episode, Guivret, has fought against Erec and has been beaten by him.20 Guivret falls into the category of knights who build a bond with Erec through Enide's presence. Having espied him, she informs Erec that he is approaching and about to attack them. Her words generate the initial tie between the two men. Guivret has been forced into remaining faithful to Erec, and to come to his help when needed.

In an earlier episode, Guivret offers the help of his male surgeons to Erec who refuses the offer. After his coma, however, Erec accepts Guivret's advice that they should travel to the Château de la Pénurie, where he can be cured by the dwarf's two sisters. When Guivret initially meets with the couple again, he does not recognize Erec and attacks him. At this moment, Enide intervenes and saves both their lives:

19 “In Erec et Enide (vv.4770-4852), when the Count Oringle, believing that Erec was dead, had scandalously tried to compel Enide to marry him by force, Chrétien had already tested and rejected an older concept of marriage based upon coercion or upon external rights of a man to claim a woman, and was championing consent as the only valid criterion of marriage”(50).

20 “Guivret is the ideal defeated knight who generously supports the victor and later offers his castle to Erec as a place to rest in safety and regain his strength”(Mandel 424).
"Chevaliers, maudiz soiez tu! 
Un home foible et sanz vertu, 
Doillant et pres navré a mort, 
As envahi a si grant tort 
Que tu ne sez dire por qoi." (5023-5027)

Because Erec is wounded, Enide names him and reveals his identity to Guivret. Thanks to her intervention, the couple not only stays alive, but also reaches the castle in which Guivret's two healers live.

Once they arrive at the Château de la Pénurie, Enide leaves Erec in the hands of the two nurses, Guivret's sisters, who treat him with baths and by changing his bandages and his plaster every day:

En une chamber délitable, 
Loing de la gent et essorable, 
En a Guivrez Erec mené. 
A lui garir ont mout pené 
Ses serors, cui li en prïa. 
Erec en eles se fïa, 
Qu'eles dou tot l'aseürrerent. 
Premiers, la morte char osterent, 
Puis mistrent sus entrait et tente; 
A lui covint mout grant entente 
Et celes, qui mout en savoient, 
Sovent ses plaies li lavoient 
Et remetoient entrait sus. 
Chascun jor quatre foiz ou plus 
Le fesoient maingier et boivre, 
Sou gardoient d'auz et de poivre. (5183-5198)

Paradoxically, while Erec undergoes treatment by the two sisters, Enide remains silent and her silence shows that in the presence of other female characters she does not need to protect herself or Erec. Unlike Queen Morgan who appears only through reference and for a short period of time, Guivret's two sisters are endowed with a longer-term appearance. Chrétien details their healing method and thus proves to his audience that
they have mastered the art of treating wounds. During the healing process, Enide sits by her knight's bed until he is cured.

The episode generates the possibility for a space in which women play more active and important roles, and Enide comes in contact with female figures that also interact with Erec but through the means of healing. The three women's coexistence engenders a slight bond between them. As they are leaving the castle, Erec takes one of the healers by the hand and Enide the other. All four of them walk out together (5298-5300). Though the bond between the women is not as strong as the ones we find in Chrétien's other works, the healing episode still does allow for the possibility of interaction between women. While Erec is wounded and weak, the narrative presents the possibility for women to play a more active role. In the first instance, Enide comes to the forefront and begins to take care of her husband-lover.

During the couple’s adventure, Erec and Enide both undergo rebirth. While Erec proves his prowess and his role as Enide’s defender, the heroine proves her faithfulness to her husband. According to Jerome Mandel, Erec officially announces his love for his lady “only after the escape from Limors, after he has been born again, raised from the dead, as it were, resurrected and, in effect, changed back to the perfect knight that he was in the beginning” (426). Enide also undergoes change and only comes to voice her desire for her lover while he is unconscious and weak. As Jewett Burland puts it: “Both Enide and Fénice […], are young brides assuming new public identities, Fénice as an empress and Enide as a princess soon to become a queen. Like Chrétien’s heroes, then, they are forced to develop a new concept of themselves in order to integrate this public persona into their psychological frame” (170). The episode in which King Arthur mentions
Morgan would not have provided the opportunity for Enide to express her desire to remain with Erec. Right before the second healing episode, however, when Count Oringle decides to force her into marriage, she lets the audience know that she had consented to marriage with Erec. The second healing episode then symbolizes a process of healing of the couple’s relationship. The two sisters return to the heroine a lover-husband that she has chosen and who now trusts that she desires to remain with him.

The healers thus play an important role in Enide's life as well. They allow for the couple to reunite. They function as healers both in the metaphoric and in the literal sense. In the end, the healers return to Enide a healthy and transformed Erec, while she demonstrates her trust in their work by patiently and silently waiting for them to practice their healing. Enide also undergoes transformation. She voices her desire and, at the same time, comes to better trust Erec. She has confidence in their ability to treat her lover, and then to unite her with him.21

Yvain

The title of George Duby's book *Le chevalier, la femme et le prêtre* fits well with Eve Sedgwick's and Gail Ruben's denunciation of women functioning as objects of exchange between men through triangulated rapports dictated by tradition and society. Duby suggests that because women had no real say in who to marry and because their opinion was not even articulated on this matter, they were simply used as objects of control and for political goals both by the church and by the aristocratic community of the Middle Ages.

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21 “What critics have taken to be a series of episodes in which Erec tests Enide’s obedience therefore might as easily be viewed as a series of episodes in which Erec makes it possible for Enide to understand her true identity as a person who is allowed to make mistakes and as a wife who will be protected and loved ‘no matter what happens’” (Jewett Burland 177).
In *Yvain*, we find fewer examples of rivalries among men for the same woman, or alliances between men through the exchange of a female figure. Yet, *Yvain* has at the heart of it a schema of alliance in which a female figure encourages another woman to become the object of exchange to protect her townspeople. The object of Yvain's affection is the Lady of the Fountain, or Laudine, whose husband he has killed. Lunete, the Lady’s servant, functions as the mediator between Yvain and Laudine. Lunete convincingly argues in front of the Lady that marriage with the rival would allow the townspeople to ally with King Arthur's knights, and it would spare them the King's attack. Lunete functions as the representative of Yvain and of the townspeople. The Lady initially accepts her suggestion for the same reasons. Laudine then becomes objectified and allies with Yvain to protect her town.

There exist two healing episodes in this third romance. As in *Erec and Enide*, healing has a minor part in the story, but both episodes further generate the opportunity for traditional roles to be reversed. Healing provides the female personae a chance to gain agency, and to build bonds with other women. The reversal of roles can better be seen in *Yvain*, and in one episode, healing is explicitly described as an important component of women's lives. Knights are also more boldly used as a means of protection by women during these sequences of events. The female characters thus temporarily undergo transformation so that they act brave and proud, and they find allies, through healing, in order to protect themselves against possible enemies. These two episodes open the possibility for an alternative structure in response to the triangulated rapports that create homosocial ties between men.
Yvain's relationship with his Lady functions as a frame to his other adventures. Like Erec, Yvain must fulfill his obligations towards his society and show that he is a worthy warrior. He asks permission from his Lady to leave for a year with King Arthur. Laudine chooses a date for his return, and Yvain forgets this deadline. The story of his return and his attempt at repairing his mistake contains many subordinate adventures that take place on his road back to his lady.

The first healing episode appears after Yvain becomes mad and runs into the forest. A maiden tells him that his lady requests her ring back and Yvain is acutely distressed to the point of madness. After penetrating into the forest, he rips his clothes, pulls on his hair, and, once he has fully turned wild, is fed dry bread by a hermit. Finally, Yvain falls and faints. While on their stroll near the forest, a lady and her maidens find him and one maiden suggests that they should revive Yvain so that he can protect them from Count Alier, who is about to attack their town. When they return to the castle, the lady instructs her maiden to take Queen Morgan's ointment and to rub it on the knight's cheeks.

La dame dist: "Or n'aiéz soing, Que chertes, së il ne s'en fuit, A l'aïde de Deu, je cuit, Li hosteron nous de la teste Toute la rage et la tempeste. Mais tost aller vous y couvient, Car d'un onguement me souvient Que me donna Margue la sage, Et si me dist que nule rage N'est en le teste qu'il n'en ost." (2946-2955)

Once again, as in the romance of Erec and Enide, Queen Morgan appears but only as a reference. As in the previous tale, her potion serves to quickly bring health to a knight.
The Lady assigns the job of healing to one of her maidens, who then fails to follow her instructions. The task of healing is handed down from Queen to Lady, and from Lady to her maidens. A medieval university doctor would not have touched patients, this task being reserved for barbers and other intermediary persons. In a similar fashion, the lady sets forth the diagnosis and cure, which she has borrowed from Queen Morgan, while the maiden actually treats the patient. By contrast, the maiden’s job is to practice, to follow her lady's instructions in order to deliver the treatment. Morgan's ointment, which indirectly provides protection for a community of women, does help, however, to produce strong ties between women.

The women healing practitioners of Old French romances rarely fail to carry out healing properly, and they usually apply the proper amount of medicine for the cure. These women most often enter into the binaries of healer/witch or healer/anti-healer and voluntarily decide to restore health or to inflict pain, or to restore health or kill their patient. In *Yvain*, however, the maiden fails to do as her lady has prescribed. Yet, she does disregard her orders out of ill intentions; rather, she chooses an excessive dosage of the concoction in order to guarantee the knight’s revival. Carried away by the task, she empties Morgan's bottle:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Et prent l'onguement, si l'en oint} \\
&Tant comme en la boiste en a point, \\
&\text{Car sa garison tant couvoite} \\
&\text{Que de l'oiindre par tout s'esplotie;} \\
&\text{Si le met trestout en despense} \\
&\text{Que ne li chaut de la deffence} \\
&\text{Sa dame, qu'il ne l'en souvient.} \\
&\text{Plus y en met qu'il n'en couvient} \\
&\text{Mais bien, che lî est vis, l'emploie.} \\
&\text{Les temples et le vis l'en froie} \\
&\text{Et tot le cors jusc'a l'orteill. (2991-3001)}
\end{align*}
\]
The maiden fails to do as her lady says and lustily utilizes all of Morgan's ointment. While Yvain is unconscious, he temporarily becomes the maiden’s love object since, in a semi-erotic fashion, she rubs his body “tot le cors jusc’a l’orteill.” Healing provides an authoritative role so that the knight becomes temporarily objectified through her hands.

Yet, the women in this episode mostly use healing as a means of defense. Healing, in this instance, thus engenders a different structure of alliance and of protection. Rather than exchanging a woman for marriage in order to build an alliance, and for survival, the women of this part of the narrative rather resort to the use of Morgan's potion as a shield. Women thus become agents controlling exchange and alliances and they build homosocial bonds among themselves. In a way, the maiden breaks the bond with her lady once she fails to obey orders. The fact that she does revive the knight and return him to her lady further reinforces the idea that her intentions are to guarantee her lady’s plans rather than to spoil them. Her actions can be ethically interpreted as her desire to guarantee the knight’s revival, despite the erotic description of her rubbing Yvain from head to toe.

The author places emphasis on Morgan’s potion and its important role in his female protagonists’ life. When the maiden remembers that she was told to use only a small amount of the potion, she decides to drop the bottle into a fountain. She then lies to her lady and tells her that she lost the bottle because it slipped from her hand and fell into a fountain. The Lady then reminds her of the importance of the bottle as a means for their survival:

S'en ot la dame mout grant ire  
Et dit: "Chi a mout laide perte,  
Car de che sui seüre et cherte  
Qu'ele n'iert jammais retrouvee.
Mais puis que la chose est alee
Il n'i a que du conforter.
Tele eure quide on desirer
Son bien c'on desire son mal,
Aussi comme de chest vassal
Cuidoie bien et joie avoir,
Si ai perdu de mon avoir
Tout le meilleur et le plus chier.
Nepourquant molt vous veul proier
De lui servir seur toute rien." (3114-3125)

The lady's words prove stronger and more significant if we consider again the importance of the potion for women within society. In the first instance, she states that Yvain's return to sanity was not worth losing "de mon avoir/Tout le meilleur et le plus chier." The potion proves most important to her. She also states that sometimes we think doing something to our advantage when we are acting to our disadvantage. Both statements knit a correlation between Yvain and Morgan's ointment. Yvain is thus reduced to an object of exchange, and to a means of survival. The lady clearly means that she took a short route for her survival that will cost her in the long run.

Despite the lady's regrets, when the knight arrives at the castle, the maidens take charge of his healing, and prepare him for battle:

Si le baignent et son chief levent
Et le font rere et rouongnier,
Car on li peüst apongnier
Le barbe a plain poing seur le faiche. (3134-3137)

Yvain still functions as an object of exchange for the protection of their town. In short, Morgan's potion can revive many knights, while Yvain can only protect her once. The Lady's statement further shows that the Lévi-Straussian structure of exchange does not function in this case. The women of this episode cannot be compared to commodity while
the knight’s strength is used by women for their town’s protection. Morgan offers an
ointment that symbolizes her knowledge of healing to the community of women, and thus
enables them to exchange the potion for men's strength and bravery.

A second example of women practicing healing precedes the final episode in
which Yvain is reunited with Laudine. As he leaves the side of Lunete and of his Lady,
Yvain arrives at the castle of the Count of *Noire Épine*. Because he is wounded from his
previous jousting, the Count asks his two daughters to treat him:

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Et de lui garir s'entremetent
Deus pucheles qui mout savoient
De surgïe, et si estoient
Filles au seigneur de laiens.
Jourz il sejourna ne sai quanz
Tant quë il et sen leon furent
Gari et que raler s'en durent. (46890-46896)
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Chrétien claims that the two women were knowledgeable in the art of surgery. Perhaps
this precision exists because the two women are daughters of a count, and that because of
their high social status it would be uncourtly to refer to them as mere healers. More
important than the reference to the women's knowledge of surgery is the advantages
brought about by healing to the younger one of the two sisters.

After the above-mentioned episode, the Count of *Noire Épine* is attacked by the
Count *de la Mort* and thus he dies. The older of the two sisters then claims all of her
father's inheritance and threatens not to share with the younger maiden. The two sisters
argue and decide to seek justice at King Arthur's court and while the older sister arrives
first and convinces Gauvain to defend her right, the younger sister can only leave the
court helpless and to tell King Arthur that her situation is unjust. When she leave the
court, the younger sister then goes on a journey to Yvain, disguised as *Le chevalier au*
lion, in order to ask him to help her. She falls ill, however, and another maiden continues her quest. Once this second female character finds Yvain, she informs him about the younger sister's situation and Yvain then returns to court to claim the sister's right to half her father's territory. Not knowing that Le chevalier au lion is Yvain, Gauvain fights him, but Yvain wins and thus claims for the younger sister half her father’s belongings.

This inset tale is important in that it echoes what the Lady had previously claimed about Morgan's ointment: that it could help her exchange healing for the protection of her town. In a similar fashion, the count of Noire Epine’s younger daughter heals Yvain and this act later on allows her to seek Yvain’s help and protection against her older sister. Healing Yvain provides the younger sister a certain degree of power and it allows her to build an alliance with the knight she treats. In exchange for her practice, Yvain defends her and gives her the right to claim her inheritance.

In this sense, healing allows for a displacement of the triangle of alliance that Lévi-Strauss proposes. The process of objectification and commodification of women gives way to another model: women help engender a structure in which they exchange their knowledge, their ointment and their healing practice for male warriors’ bravery and help. Healing provides them the possibility to become subjects exchanging knights for their survival.

In Cligès and Erec and Enide, one triangle is temporarily replaced by another. When male knights compete with one another for the love of the same woman, or when they exchange one woman between themselves, they build a homosocial bond and women thus function as catalysts for the generation of such a bond. Women who have a background in healing, magic, and medicine intervene so as to displace this triangulated
rapport. Through healing, two women come in contact, interact, and symbolic and material exchanges take place between them. The healers exchange potions, their knowledge of healing, and even a wounded-then-cured knight, with the figure of the amie who in turn exchanges her trust and devotion. In *Yvain*, we find a different format of exchange. In the first example of healing, Morgan functions as the female figure that, from a distance, enables homosocial bonds to come about between women. Because she is absent, her ointment comes to symbolize the means through which homosocial bonds can be displaced so as to exist between women. Women can become agents controlling the traffic of exchange, and the male knight then becomes the object rendering possible their protection.

**Women’s Medical Practice in Chrétien’s Romances**

In the three romances studied thus far, women healing practitioners of various kinds make their appearance in order to mediate the continuation of the main couple’s adventure. The practice of healing by women proves most curious since it generates a questioning of the author’s take on this practice especially by female characters. As shown previously, in each tale, a disturbance appears once healing takes place by women. On the one hand, the bond between these female doctor-magicians and the tale’s heroine temporarily displaces focus from men onto women. On the other hand, women who practice healing can exchange this skill with a knight’s jousting skills in order to protect themselves.

The healing practitioner also plays an important role independently of the tale’s heroine. In Chrétien’s romances, healers appearing under different guises come to represent a vast array of types of curing and magic practiced by women. They are not
endowed with a specific title, though, in specific instances, the author does categorize
their practice. A modern reader can come to wonder whether Chrétien would have been a
proponent of women practicing medicine and gaining capital from their knowledge. The
author does not provide us with an explicit answer, though other elements of his tale can
let us make the assertion that he is not opposed to the actual practice of medicine by
women.

In *Perceval* or *Le conte du Graal*, the healers play a negligible role within the
economy of the narrative, yet their description proves the most curious. It is a known fact
that women were not allowed to practice medicine at the university, especially in France.
Yet, in *Perceval*, Chrétien refers to three women scholars of medicine who accompany a
male doctor. The reference differs from the one made in the other romances studied thus
far since these women are officially entitled scholars of medicine. The practice of
medicine by women can disturb the traditional binaries that reduce women to body and to
the inferior sex as much as it provides a certain authority and independence to women. In
Chrétien’s romances, however, the author appears to take a rather pro-feminist stand and
to defend women’s right to gain their own capital and authority.

The reference in *Perceval* follows the episode in which the hero stands staring at
three stains of blood on white snow. A falcon hunts a goose, grabs it by the collar and
three drops of blood fall on the white snow in front of Perceval. Daniel Poirion has
noticed that this passage is particularly interesting because the narrative slows down
(Poirion 14). Then, Sagremor and Keu, who are with king Arthur, threaten to fight
against *Perceval* if he does not reveal his identity. Sagremor is first defeated, then Keu.
We are provided with a fairly detailed description of Keu's injuries:
Keu fiert si que sa lance brisse
Et esmie com une escorce,
Car il i met tote sa force.
Et Percevaus pas ne se faint,
Desus la bocle an haut l'ataint,
Si l'abati sor une roiche
Que la chanole li esloiche
Et qu'antre lo code et l'aële,
Ensin con une seiche estele,
L'os do braz destre li brissa,
Si con li soz lo devissaa,
Que molt sovant deviné l'ot. (4236-4247)

Keu is a humorous and devious character who suffers defeat here, as he does in each of
Chrétien’s other Arthurian romances. In fact, Chrétien de Troyes consistently depicts Keu
as an anti-hero and he uses this character to further emphasize the bravery of knights. In
this case, Keu's actions are criticized by Gauvain who then tells the king:

"Si con vous meïsmes l'avez
Toz jorz et jugié a droit,
Que chevaliers autre ne doit
Oster, si con cil .II. ont fait,
De son panser, que que il [l]'ait." (4284-4288)

Keu and Sagremor also represent examples of uncourtly behavior while Gauvain shows
how to prepare properly when he tricks Perceval into revealing his identity. Because Keu
is the counter-example of a brave knight, he is also the only character in need of
immediate treatment after his injury. The king at once sends him a doctor with three
female assistants:

Et li rois, qui molt l'avoit tanre
Et molt l'amoit an son coraige,
Li envoia un mire saige
Et .III. pucele de s'escole,
Qui li renoent la canole
Et si li ont lob raz lié
Et resodé l'os esmié,
Puis l'ont au tré lo roi porté
Et si l'ont molt réconforté,
Qu'il dient qu'il garra bien,
Ja ne s'en desconfort de rien. (4270-4280)

The passage specifically mentions that the three young girls are schooled in the art of surgery. One can wonder whether this section plays the role of ridiculing Keu who is treated by "schooled" young girls. Yet, at the same time, the reader comes to wonder whether women were often trained by a male doctor in a space as the "escole" mentioned in the above passage. The Parisian medical school did not become a prominent place until the thirteenth century. Medical faculties did not begin to centralize medical knowledge until the end of the twelfth century. It is unclear how the term "escole" mentioned in the above passage should be placed within the context of the history of medicine. One can ask, however, whether Chrétien was curious about the practice of medicine during his time, and especially by women.

Chrétien's perspective on female healing practitioners remains ambiguous. His mention of the term “escole” in Perceval generates a new perspective on his description of the other healers and his stance on the practice of medicine by women can better be explained if we reexamine, on the one hand, Thessala’s role as doctor, and on the other hand, the role of the daughter of the count of Noire Epine in Yvain.

Thessala, in Cligès, is described as knowledgeable in the science of necromancy. Although she is so depicted from the start of the romance, she does manage to compete with and outdo the male doctors. In order to fool the emperor’s doctors, she presents them with a fatally ill woman’s urine sample.22 The Salernitan doctors are also unable to

22 "The application of this means of diagnosis again places Thessala squarely within the standards of practice of the day, as the study of urine was one of the most commonly used indicators of sickness and health in the Middle Ages”(Doggett 52).
decipher how she has placed Fénice in a temporary coma. Laine Doggett described the passage in which Thessala cures Fénice from the doctors’ beating: “Thessala carefully dresses Fénice’s wounds so that Fénice will begin to heal. The irony of the situation is that Thessala heals wounds caused by doctors from a famous medical school” (51). The physicians are thus ridiculed by Thessala first because they cannot scientifically prove that Fenice is alive and also because they inflict pain and wounding on their female patient rather than curing her. Thessala thus outshines the other healing practitioners.

As previously mentioned, the healer’s great performance can be attributed to her cunning nature. Women do often appear as the more cunning sex in Old French literature. Yet, the author’s insistence on Thessala’s intelligence can be read as his view that women can also master the science of medicine.

In *Yvain*, healing, capital, and other forms of material gain correlate so that it can be affirmed that the practice of medicine by women provides them power and independence. Grace M. Armstrong claims that the two episodes at the end of Yvain’s adventures generate a correlation between women, labor, and capital gain: “It is important to begin by noting that Chrétien’s sequences concerning the imprisoned silkworkers at the Château de Pesme Aventure and the sisters of the Noire Espine locked in a dispute over their father’s inheritance are Yvain’s final two adventures in service to victims” (Armstrong 173). The hero liberates the silkworkers before he is asked by the younger daughter of the count to fight for her right to half the inheritance. The notion of liberation thus comes to correlate directly with the acquisition of authority and a certain

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23 "They appear to understand Fenice as having perpetuated a crime for which they stand in judgement. They use torture to try to elicit a confession” (Doggett 67). Doggett also adds: “we might expect that the three physicians from the best-known medical school of Western Europe at the time would have understood that a soporific could produce the state that they see in Fenice, and that only the passage of time would allow this pharmalogically induced sleep to wear off” (Doggett 68).
degree of power.24 The silkworkers are liberated from a lifetime of labor whose profit is then taken away by the Roi de l’Ile des Pucelles (Armstrong 176). In the episode that follows, Yvain fights for the young daughter of count Noire Epine. The younger sister establishes a bond with Yvain once, with the help of her older sister, she cures his battle wounds and this act allows her to later seek Yvain so he can protect her. Healing, then, indirectly allows her to claim her father’s land and to become a landowner. The silkworkers are rescued by Yvain yet they are not able to guarantee protection from another knight through exchange. Medical practice, on the other hand, becomes a tool for the daughter of the count of Noire Epine that she can exchange for protection. For this reason, she specifically ventures out of Arthur’s court to seek Yvain. The castle of Pesme Aventure reminds us of the castle of Penurie in Erec and Enide. It may seem farfetched to assume that Chrétien questions the status of Guivret’s sisters in Erec and Enide through indirect reference. Yet, it can be argued that the author does take a rather feminist stand and shows that women can gain authority, property, capital profit, or alliances through their knowledge and practice of medical or magical healing.

Philippe Walter confidently asserts that Chrétien must have been aware of, if not influenced by, the intellectual milieu of his epoch:

Quand on considère dans les romans de Chrétien les nombreux monologues articulés comme des chaînes de raisonnement en forme, et qu’on voit la Raison (que Chrétien récusera dans le Chevalier de la charrette) devenir une puissance élevant des pretentions à la direction de la vie, on doit se demander si l’auteur n’a pas été touché lui aussi par le remuement general des idées, et s’il n’a pas participé au movement critique qui a gagné tout ce qui pense et écrit en son temps. (14)

24 “In Chevalier au Lion, the plight of the three hundred women silkworkers imprisoned at the Château de Pesme Aventure carries important overtones of economic, political, and gender exploitation. The women’s poverty is remarked upon three times and thus emphasized”(Armstrong 173).
If the authors of his time and the intellectual movements were of interest to Chrétien, can we not assume that he was also aware of the changing role of the Parisian medical school and the gradual transformation in the world of medicine? Chrétien was very possibly aware of the changing status of healers at large due to the centralization of medicine. Jean Frappier claims that Chrétien’s depiction of silkworkers in *Yvain* stems from a lived observation of Champagne’s women’s poor working conditions: “Chrétien donne là une image et un echo d’une misère ouvrière dont il a été probablement le témoin compatissant dans certains ouvriers ou ateliers de Champagne” (156). If Frappier’s statement rings true that Chrétien sympathized with the silkworkers, then can one not assume that he also sympathized with women healers of his time? Women healers play secondary roles in Chrétien’s romances. They, unlike the lady, do not have a knight-lover to protect them. They thus stand in opposition to knights and their ladies. These women demonstrate bravery through their practice of magic and medicine. They allow themselves or other female characters, including the lady, to gain agency for a limited amount of time. Through healing, they accumulate symbolic or material capital which they then exchange to gain power, property, or authority.

The healers can also temporarily generate a possible reformulation of triangulated relationships in which women function as mediators between men. Their intervention does not disturb the original triangles of love and alliance set up to generate homosocial bonds between men. Yet, during their appearances, the focus temporarily shifts onto female characters. These secondary characters appear to shed light on the lady’s perspective. They put into question whether the lady is completely passive, and whether she merely functions as the object, mediator, or driving force.
CHAPTER TWO
Women Healers and Female Characters as Semi-Authoritative Personae in Marie de France’s Lais

“It is the Celtic, translated by Marie, that allows the ekphrastic paintings of the Latin love tradition to take on entirely new connotations that transform the lay from lament to romance.” – Stephen G. Nichols.

Marie de France composed her Lais at the end of the twelfth century and addressed them to Henry, assumed to be Henry II, king of England (Burgess 83). The most general opinion is that Marie composed twelve lais,25 all twelve of which, in addition to her “Prologue,” can be found in the Harley Manuscript (Hanning and Ferrante 25)26 and the three narratives containing episodes of healing, “Guigemar,” “Lai des Deus Amanz,” and “Eliduc,” appear as the first, the sixth, and the twelfth lais respectively.27 Numerous critics approach Marie’s text through the Lais’ major theme of love.28 The theme of healing also derives indirectly from the theme of love, since the sick or wounded are usually struck both physically by illness and mentally and emotionally by love illness. In her Prologue, Marie states that the reader/listener should “gloser la letre/et lur sen le surplus metre” (15-16) and critics have indeed amply studied Marie’s Lais and provided various interpretations “from their own wisdom.” The current chapter borrows from past interpretations only in order to shed light on what Marie might have had to add about the role and representation of women practicing healing and medicine.

25 “The narrative lai as a genre flourished approximately in the hundred years between the mid-twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries, though the lyric lai survived much longer and indeed became one of the fixed forms of the later Middle Ages” (Bloch 6). To Bloch’s description we can add that the genre of the lai is the written transcription of old Celtic oral tales.
26 London, British Library, Harley MS 4431.
27 The current study will follow in which the lais appear in the Harley manuscript.
The theme of healing links the three tales so that there appears a gradual progression from “Guigemar” to “Les Deus Amanz” and finally to “Eliduc.” Examining episodes containing the practice of medicine allows us to show that in these tales healing relates to the way love is conceived between the knight and his lady. In the end, healing and love help define the couple’s identity. In addition, the female healer or medical practitioner generates a new possibility for women, encouraging them to consider alternative life styles to those prescribed by tradition and society. Furthermore, these episodes provide an opportunity to render visible a process of rewriting, since healing episodes are a reflection of the way Marie seeks to represent her own role as writer and poet.

Marie’s Lais are generally studied as a continuation of traditional discourse on love, heterosexual relationships, and on women, or they are interpreted as adding extra meaning to these discourses, by questioning them. Feminist readers in particular either critique Marie because she mere reiterates male-constructed discourse on women or they praise her, shows how she slightly deconstructs these discourses.29 Burgess inquires into medieval texts that treat the love theme and deduces that in Marie’s text in particular true love’s definition borrows from the feudal concept of loyalty: “it is no surprise that loyalty, cornerstone of the feudal world, should be at the heart of Marie’s thinking of love” (147). The feudal form of exchange may explain the heterosexual couple’s relationship, and, by correlation, this relationship may have function as a reflection of the interaction between lord and vassal and between knights.30 In this sense, Burgess’s observation confirms that women may play the role of mediators between men, and they

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29 Mickel, 41. Finke and Schichtman, 488.
30 “In the twelfth century the verb *amer* and the substantive *amur* are used to denote the relationship between a lord and a vassal, just as that between the sexes or between man and God”(Burgess 151).
may function as objects symbolizing loyalty between knights, and between patron and client, within the feudal structure.

Women also mediate by generating rivalry between knights who claim to love the same Lady and who can boast of their prowess by fighting for her. Jerry Root claims that the *Lais* exemplify the type of courtly discourse that confines women to ideal standards defined by men.31 Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman propose a more optimistic reading of Marie’s work. They consider the historical context of the *Lais* and argue that new patronage relationships came about around the time of the work’s composition. These scholars question whether Marie was herself such a patron and they study whether patron-client relationships in the narratives may shed light on this hypothesis. Finke and Schichtman state that in addition to the “surrogate” patron role played by lords’ wives, women in the *Lais* play more important roles as independent patrons:

The fairy mistress of “Lanval” and the survival of Marie’s *Lais* indicate the existence of something like a “new woman” in Henry’s court, a woman who—like the new men—could break out of the confines of ascribed status (the ascribed status of gender as well as that of class) and transform intellectual property into capital, a woman who could, with her own abilities, accumulate sufficient capital to receive love as a patron in her own right and not only as a conduit for her husband’s patronage. (500)

It would be difficult, and dangerous, to speculate on such a possibility of a new type of female patron who could ask for loyalty and love because of accumulated capital. The current chapter does, however, interpret Marie’s work by asking whether the author puts more faith in her healers than did her male contemporaries. In other terms, from healing episodes, it becomes possible to ask whether Marie had high hopes for independent women practicing healing. Women are imprisoned and confined to an ideal, as Jerry Root

31 “These stories suggest that the courtly discourse empowers women only to the extent that they correspond to an idea created by this (mainly male) discourse” (Root 20).
suggests, if one reads the *Lais* without adding the “surplus de sens.” The healing episodes show, however, that Marie takes into consideration interactions between women and the possible existence of homosocial bonds between them.

**Guigemar**

Guigemar shines as a knight at the court of the king of Brittany, but he lacks one quality, he cannot fall in love. One day, on a hunting adventure, Guigemar finds a white doe and her antlers. He shoots and wounds the doe, but his bow returns to wound him in the leg. The magical creature then leaves Guigemar with a curse: he can only be healed by his beloved. The knight then finds a boat outside the forest, boards it, and reaches a garden where he is discovered by a lady who has been imprisoned by her jealous husband. The lady’s sole visitors are her husband’s niece and an elderly castrated priest. The two women tend to the knight’s wounds and Guigemar’s physical wound slowly heals, but then he falls in love with his healer. The lady also falls ill with love and the two begin a year-long affair. They are then discovered by the jealous husband who imprisons his lady in a tower while Guigemar is forced to return to Brittany. Two years go by and one day the lady manages to escape from the tower. She finds the same type of mysterious boat that had carried Guigemar, boards it, and arrives in Brittany. A knight, Meriaduc, then finds her and falls in love with her. He too imprisons her, and tries to rape her. Meriaduc organizes a jousting tournament that Guigemar attends. During the tournament, the two lovers see each other, and while the lady unties a knot in Guigemar’s shirt, her lover unties her chastity belt. This process of untying knots helps the two lovers to identify each other. Meriaduc, still desiring the lady, challenges Guigemar and is killed by him.
In the Harley manuscript, “Guigemar” appears as the first lai within the series and Marie’s only mention of her first name turns up in the prologue to this narrative. The healing scene of this initial lai proves less significant in terms of the economy of the narrative. The fairy healer does save Guigemar’s life, though healing is simply one element on the hero’s love journey. The scene does, however, provide insight into the way the narrator puts such episodes into place in order to emphasize gender construction and women’s status. The healing scene exemplifies how Marie’s approach to the theme of love transgresses intertextual tradition. At first glance, the story appears simple and self-explanatory. It deals with the taboo love affair of Guigemar and his beloved and the obstacles the lovers must overcome in order to unite. The healing scene, however, complicates this initial reading because Guigemar’s fatal wound places him at the mercy of women. The knight is forced to remain passive while women actively take charge of him and of his destiny.

The healing episode begins with Guigemar hunting the doe, yet the details that precede the hunt help to better explain the turn of events. The beginning of the tale contains a short description of Guigemar’s family background and Guigemar himself as a shining knight at the king’s court. The knight is so perfect that no woman is of his liking and this small flaw threatens his status as a knight. Milena Michaïlova has focused on the relationship between the terms “per” meaning pair and “peri” meaning lost in the first section (67): “Etant sans “per”, il est déjà exclu de la communauté; il est en dehors de toute comparaison et compétition avec eux” (69). The phonetic association between the two terms serves to indicate that Guigemar’s perfection has made him flawed. Because he is outstanding, no woman is able to win his love, and this excludes him from the society
to which he belongs. The text considers as already understood the fact that in order to be perfect, the knight must enter into a relationship with a lady of his own social status. According to the lai, courtly society considers it a given that in order to belong to it, knights and ladies must form pairs. Ironically, Guigemar’s outstanding characteristics automatically place him on the outskirts of the society and provide him a vantage point from which he involuntarily disturbs this society’s norms.

In order to question the social milieu constructed by medieval romance, Marie resorts to the use of the “merveilleux:” the hunting scene, indeed, allows the author to use the “merveilleux” in order to introduce a change in the traditional way knights and ladies meet and fall in love.32 Many critics have examined and provided an explanation for Marie’s inclusion of the hunting episode. Burgess, for example, states that “the ideal of hunting is central to many of the lays and is often linked to adultery and betrayal” (90). Michaïlova, on the other hand, provides a more detailed explanation for the presence of this scene, and she argues that the double wounding by the knight’s arrow symbolizes his paradoxical status, since he is the ideal and the excluded knight.33 Finally, Sienaert simply remarks that the doe’s words are prophetic.34

In medieval literature, hunting is often as a metaphor for knight-lady relationships. Hence, the double wounding by the arrow symbolizes the process of putting into question the hierarchically structured relationship of the future couple. The

32 “La géographie dans les lais laisse entendre une dualité de l’espace qui semble recouper une division morale de l’espace. Le monde paraît bipartite, partagé entre le monde social où vit le personnage, celui de sa réalité, et l’Autre monde, entre le réel et l’onirique”(Michaïlova 70). Sienaert also notices the transition in the lais between the world of “merveilleux” and the real world. The critic reads these short tales as “des contes merveilleux qui se dégagent peu à peu des contraintes du genre merveilleux et évoluent vers le genre nouveau de la nouvelle psychologique”(Sienaert 11).
33 “Donner une blessure à l’animal symbolique et en recevoir une est le seul double geste qui découle de la situation double et ambiguë où se trouve ce chevalier à la fois sans ‘per’ et ‘peri’”(Michaïlova 67).
34 “La biche se met à parler et ses paroles sont prophétiques”(Sienaert 52).
hunter-hunted binary may parallel the knight-lady binary so as to hierarchically structure the relationship. In Marie’s tale, however, the doe also fatally wounds Guigemar so that he is forced to listen to her advice. Contrary to tradition, Guigemar then becomes the wounded that will be found by the lady. Before dying, the doe says:

“Oï, lasse! Je sui ocise!
Et tu, vassal, ki m’as nafree,
Tels seie la tue destinee :
Ja mais n’aies tu medecine !
Ne par herbe ne par racine,
Ne par mire ne par poisun
N’avras tu ja mes guarisun
De la plaie qu’as en la quisse,
De si que cele te guarisse,
Ki suferra pur tue amur
Si grant peine et si grant dolur,
Qu’unken femme tant ne sufri ;
Et tu referas tant pur li,
Dunt tuit cil s’esmerveillerunt,
Ki aiment e amé avrunt
U ki puis amerunt après.
Va t’en de ci! Lai m’aveir pes!”
(106-122)

These prophetic words are most interesting because they reveal how the text attributes healing to women. A close analysis reveals the paradoxical perspective found on women’s and healing throughout the Lais. The doe enumerates four different healing methods for Guigemar: “par herbe ni racine,” “par mire,” “par poisun,” and “pur […] amur.” Only the last method is guaranteed to save his life, yet it appears as the least “vraisemblable.” First, the doe tells Guigemar, “ja mais n’aies tu medecine!” so as to emphasize the remedy rather than the healer, and so as to reduce the beloved to the status of object. Her initial statement comes to undermine women’s professional affiliation and their healing abilities. The beast lets her hunter know that love is the only cure for him.

35 “Ne mettant donc à aucun moment en doute la réalité ni la vérité des paroles de la biche, Guigemar commence à les exécuter”(Sienaert 53).
The lady, it seems, functions both as cure, or a love-object with medicinal attributes, and healer. She is compared to herbs, a potion, and to medicine. By failing to recognize women’s professional medical affiliation, Marie proves plausible Peggy McCracken’s argument that women are devoid of a medical title within literature, though such titles for women did circulate within the society of the time. McCracken says that the female “is routinely denied any title (like *miresse*) that might associate her with the authority and status accorded to the male medical practitioners who are called *mires* or *fisiciens* in medieval narratives” (241). Not only does Marie not provide her female protagonist a professional title, but she also reduces her to the status of love potion.

Through a passage in Thomas’s *Roman de Tristan*, Peggy McCracken argues that the title “*miresse*” did circulate at the time, but it was not used for women practicing medicine within literature.

Thomas’s *Roman de Tristan* provides an eloquent example of the use of the term [“*miresse*”] and the simultaneous denial of the social status or authority it might accord. At the end of the story the wounded and dying Tristan sends Kaerdin to seek Iseut and bring her to cure him. Iseut is well-known for her healing skills and there is no indication that magic cures are needed or desired—it is for her medical knowledge that Tristan sends for the queen. In order to hide Iseut’s arrival from his wife, he tells Kaerdin to disguise her as a *miresse* (“Pur miriesce la ferez tenir,” Thomas, Douce 1287). The disguise suggests that the sight of a woman doctor is common enough not to raise suspicion, yet nowhere in the text is Iseut herself accorded the title *miresse*. (249)

Tristan’s statement reveals the way in which medical practice strips women of their traditionally accepted feminine identity. Iseut appears as “*miriesce*” or as “Iseut” but not as both. When the title “*miresce*” is attributed to Iseut, she no longer represents an *amie* nor a woman who can potentially become the beloved. She rather acts as a woman doctor whose sexual identity is no longer highlighted. 36 In “Guigemar,” the theme of healing’s

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36 “What counts as the sexual is, as we shall see, variable and itself political” (Sedgwick 15).
dual referentiality also reveals the woman healer’s identity as distinct from that of the lady. McCracken’s example parallels Marie’s reference to “mire” in Guigemar since in both instances one perceives the irony behind assuming that the professional title correlates with a proper practice of medicine. Despite lack of professional recognition of women’s practice of medicine, their practice proves better known and more widely accepted.

A second reading of the passage, however, disturbs this initial juxtaposition of the beloved and medicine. Marie’s magical doe does mention that even male doctors cannot cure her hero. The author then juxtaposes herbs, a potion, and a male doctor, a “mire,” and the correlation also reduces the male practitioner to the status of herbs and medicine. The passage renders both readings possible so that the beloved and the male doctor are simultaneously compared to medicine and herbs despite the fact that the title of “mire” is attributed to the practitioner and not to the lady.

The passage also introduces the notion of metaphoric healing and the doe’s solution links together fictional female characters. She rejects all three methods of healing she first enumerates in order to state that only love can cure Guigemar. In juxtaposition to the term “par mire,” this last solution becomes more interesting since men are then excluded from the list of possible healers. In the tale of Tristan can be found a similar reference to healing by one’s beloved. When Tristan fights the giant, he discovers that his only curer is Iseut, and in the final episode, Tristan dies because Iseut, his only healer, does not reach him on time. If the lai of Guigemar contains an intertextual reference to the legend of Tristan, the reference can be read as generating a correlation between the beloved in both tales and, by extension, linking women healing
practitioners of medieval fiction. Iseut learns to heal from her mother, and she shares her potion with Brangien. Through the healing reference, the doe can then be seen as symbolizing a reference to the way healing and the making of potions link together fictional female characters. In this lai, the doe generates a bond between herself, the lady, and the lady’s niece. Before dying, she sends off the hero into a feminine space, and thus ordains that he be treated only by women.

The healing episode illustrates Marie’s interpretation of love and the text’s questioning of the hierarchical binaries. Within medieval romance and courtly poetry, women are often represented as healers—medicines for the wounded lover, knight, or poet, and erotic relationships within these literatures are also often represented in association with hunting. As Michaïlova has remarked, in Marie’s lai, a magical double wounding occurs so that the hunter is at the mercy of the fatally wounded prey. Semple also comments on this episode: “The event that drives him [Guigemar] to love occurs during the hunt, an activity associated with the nobility, with erotic conquest, but also with moments of tragic male sexual discovery (Narcissus is a hunter, as is Adonis). Unlike Narcissus or Adonis, however, Guigemar receives a wound from a woman that obliges him to seek a cure from a woman” (Semple 174). As Semple argues, Marie adds her own twist to the hunting metaphor and uses it in order to put into question the tradition way that hunting correlates with love between the knight and his lady. In Marie’s version of the hunting episode, the binary of hunter and hunted is replaced by a situation in which both hunter and hunted are wounded. Because the doe prescribes a symbolic remedy for Guigemar, she then acts as healer as much as wounded, and her position allows her to be a speaking subject. The doe puts Guigemar in the hands of his lady; she
creates a way for the other woman to actively change her destiny. Finally, the double wounding in the forest parallels the two lovers’ fatal love wound in the healing scene.

Guigemar is healed by the lady and a second female character in a prison that the lady’s old jealous husband has constructed for her. When he enters into the lady’s forbidden space, Guigemar becomes the lady’s husbands rival and he thus enters into a relationship of rivalry with him. The hero’s rivals are first the old jealous husband and, further along the narrative, the king Meriaduc who also falls in love with the lady. Male-male-female triangles thus frame the narrative, and within each triangle, the lady falls at the mercy of her lover who is to save her. In the first instance, Guigemar saves her because of his presence in her prison, and in the second case he fights for her and wins her.

Yet, within these larger triangles, women are able to build social bonds by means of Guigemar’s wound and by collaborating to treat him. The magical creature sends off the knight to his lady, and thus links herself to the women of the narrative. Within the lady’s dwelling, the niece also greatly contributes both to the treating of Guigemar and to bringing the couple together.

The decoration in the lady’s living quarters is significant in that it depicts a literal rejection of Ovid’s book *Remedia Amoris* and opts for a theory on the importance of love:

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La chambre ert peinte tut en tur 
Venus, la deusse d’amur,
Fu tresbien mise en la peinture ;
Les traiz mustrot e la nature 
Cument hom deit amur tenir
E leialment e bien servir.
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37 As Edgard Sienaert has remarked, “to obtain the cure for his physical and mental wounds Guigemar has to triumph over two lords, the lady’s husband and Meriaduc” (74).
Le livre Ovide, u il enseigne
Coment chascuns s’amur estreigne,
En un fu ardant le getout,
E tuz icels escumenjout,
Ki ja mais cel livre lirreient
Ne sun enseignement fereient. (233-244)

This passage has been studied by numerous scholars and it has been taken as Marie’s theory on love (Burgess 134). Stephen G. Nichols argues that by mentioning Ovide’s work, Marie undermines the value of Latin literature and thus opts for new borrowings and new canons. The critic rightly concludes, “to the extent that they are intended to remind the wife of her conjugal obligations, the paintings suggest the weight of authoritative Latin culture and the social customs” (Nichols 13). The Remedia remind the Lady that love translates into her loyalty and her obligations toward her husband. The Lady, however, betrays her husband and thus automatically puts into question whether all women should be loyal to their husband regardless of the husband’s age and attitude. The paintings and the dwelling itself contrast with the events of the narrative so as to juxtapose what literature prescribes for women and the putting into question of this same discourse. Michaïlova also notices that the dwelling itself symbolizes confinement and submission for women: “Le mariage, la religion, le mur, plusieurs sont les cercles d’interdiction, les boucles dits extérieurs ou inconscients qui enferment l’esprit” (74). Guigemar is then hunted, wounded, and sent off by the doe to discover the lady’s dwelling, the reality of her situation, and to deliver her from her condition.

Special focus can be placed on the importance of remedy, and healing, both in relation to Ovid’s text and in terms of the episode in which Guigemar stays in the Lady’s chamber. The duration of Guigemar’s stay within the Lady’s space is equivalent to the
amount of time it takes for his thigh wound to heal.\textsuperscript{38} There is a direct correlation, then, between Marie’s love theory, and healing, and the theme of healing then has the dual function of appearing as symbolic of Guigemar’s love for his Lady, and vice versa, and introducing a commentary on the practice of healing by women. Guigemar is healed, not just by his Lady, but by the niece as well. The daughter of the husband’s sister, indeed, lives with the Lady, and the two have grown comfortable with each other.\textsuperscript{39} During the healing scene, the two women collaborate to cure Guigemar and their practice conforms to twelfth-century healing practices. “Meager descriptions of the methods of hospital cares establish those methods as elementary: feeding, bathing, using herbals in a variety of vehicles, purging, and the ever-available bloodletting by leech or phlebotomy” (Minkowski 289):

\begin{verbatim}
La dame en sa chambre l’en meine.
Desur le lit a la meschine,
Triers dossal ki pur cortine
Fu en la chambre apareilliez,
La est li dameisels culchiez.
En bacins d’or ewe aporterent :
Sa plaie et sa quisse laverent.
A un bel drap de cheinsil blanc
Li osterent en tur le sanc ;
Puis l’unt estreitement bendé.
Mult le tientent en grant chierté.
Quant lur mangiers al vespre vint,
La pucele tant en retint,
Dunt li chevaliers out asez :
Bien est peüz e abevrez. (364-378)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{38} The thigh wound may, of course, relate to castration and to sexual wounding. The hunt in the forest does, indeed, remind the story of Adonis who is attacked in the groin by the boar he has hunted (Ovid 180). William Shakespeare, in \textit{Venus and Adonis}, places focus on the sexual implication of Adonis’ hunt and shows that his wound relates to the sexual taboo of his affair with Venus (Hulse 95).

\textsuperscript{39} Une pucele aveyt sis sire bailliee, 
ki mult ert franche e enseignee,
sa niece, fille sorur ert.
Entre les dous out grant amur;
Od li esteit quant il erroit. (246-251).
As though he were in a hospital, Guigemar is placed in the niece’s bed, bathed, fed and given water. Marie takes particular care to provide realistic details when the hero is treated.\footnote{“Les soins apportés ont un caractère tout a fait humain”(Sienaert 56).} Furthermore, this last method does not appear in the list of possible and impossible cures for Guigemar provided by the doe. The gradual progression from physical to moral wounding engenders a fourth type of healing method that can only be practiced by female personae. The doe explains that only “cele” or “une femme” who suffers for Guigemar can heal him. Minkowski states that “convents and monasteries served as early medieval clinics in providing health services to their own residents, neighboring villagers, and increasing numbers of travelers” (289). The “par mire” comment contrasts with a reference to a type of place where only women cure the patient.

Guigemar sleeps in the niece’s bed while he is recovering (365), and this second female character plays a role similar to that of the doe. The jealous husband has chosen a family member whom he trusts, yet this female figure’s actions are to the benefit of the adulterous couple. While Guigemar’s physical wound heals, he gradually feels the pain of the emotional wound.

Mes amurs l’ot feru al vif;
Ja ert sis quers en grant estrif,
Kar la dame l’a si nafré,
Tut a sun païs ublié.
De sa plaie nul mal ne sent ;
Mult suspire anguissusement. (279-384)

Benjamin Semple interprets this transition as a psychic wound replacing the physical wound: “The movement from the outer wound to the inner wound moves us from the body to the psyche” (Semple 175). This transition from body to soul and spirit highlights
the difference between the two female characters. Whereas the Lady also wounds and cures Guigemar mentally and emotionally, the husband’s niece solely practices healing and uses knowledge to cure Guigemar’s body.

The two women collaborate during healing, though the triangulated relationship that comes out of this episode only takes shape once we better understand that the servant’s role, and her feminine identity, differs from the Lady’s role and identity. Because the servant physically heals Guigemar, she can mediate between Guigemar and his beloved. Once Guigemar heals, the niece, like the doe earlier, prescribes a love remedy before putting him in the hands of the Lady.

La meschine l’araisuna.
‘Sire’, fet ele, ‘vus amez !
Gardez que trop ne vuz celez !
Amer poëz en itel guise,
Que bien iert vostre amurs assise.
Ki ma dame voldreit amer,
Mult devreit bien de li penser.
Ceste amurs sereit convenable,
Se vus amdui fussiez estable.
Vus estes bels, e ele est bele !’ (444-453)

By involving themselves with the process of treating Guigemar, the niece and the doe come to symbolize the Lady’s displaced voice. The Girardian love triangle works with jealousy, envy, and with rivalry and the Lévi-Straussian model depends on the exchange of women between men or kinship groups. The relationship between the female figures, on the other hand, is based on providing advice so that the Lady can have more control over her destiny and over the way her interaction with her lover is conceived. In this fashion, healing generates bonding between women, since they collaborate together and betray the jealous husband’s wishes to confine and isolate his wife. Furthermore, the text puts into question the Ovidian discourse on love and marriage and presents an alternative
love theory. It shows the curing qualities of love rather than its poisonous attributes, but only under the condition that the exchange between the two lovers remain bilateral.

Having reached his sole healer, Guigemar, who is fatally wounded first physically then mentally, discovers that he can only survive if he treats his Lady in the proper manner.

Playing the mediator between women, Guigemar renders possible a correspondence between the doe, the lady, and the niece. Yet, each woman relates to him in a different way. The Lady has been predestined to remain within the context of a heterosexual relationship, the servant solely functions as a helper. Healing then allows one to conceive of the different gender constructions prevalent in the lai, while it also establishes complicity among women and temporary undoes love triangles that generate homosocial bonding between men. Thanks to the doe’s monologue, and through the medical practice of women, healing is assimilated to its practice by nurses in medieval hospitals and is thus given a function more important than metaphoric healing through love. Finally, in contrast to the “mire,” women exemplify a type of practice undertaken only by women, despite the fact that female practitioners are devoid of a professional title in literary texts.

*Lai des Deus Amaz*

In this second lai, the healer’s role is more significant because the healing practitioner’s potion plays a pivotal role in the process of undoing the initial structure of relationships. As previously mentioned, in the Harley Manuscript, this lai appears in sixth position within the series of the twelve lais. In keeping with the author’s Prologue, “lai des deus amanz” comes to add a “surplus de sens” to Marie’s work. In her Prologue, the author says that she has a responsibility toward her community of readers and listeners.
Because God has endowed her with knowledge and a talent, Marie claims that she is obligated to willingly put to use her gift for the good of the community. The term “esciência” can mean either knowledge or intelligence. Marie may be referring to the various meanings of the term specified by Julien Greimas in his *Dictionnaire de l’ancien français*: “intelligence,” “raison,” “connaissance,” and “sagesse.” If Marie uses the term in a way that comes closer to the use of the term “science” in modern French, we can then wonder whether she boasts her knowledge of contemporary works on medicine, philosophy, theology, in addition to her knowledge of Latin and old tales. Marie may be aware of women’s role in the field of medicine and she may be establishing a correlation between her role as writer and other women’s role as medical practitioners. If so, does she illustrate this background when she is representing her female healing practitioners? By examining the “Lai des deus amanz”, we can offer as a response that Marie rather claims that any person, possessing knowledge and talent, must voluntarily foreground it as she does in her Prologue. Because she is a woman, though, her statement still leads us to ask whether she calls into question women’s role in society and their responsibility to the community of women and to the larger community.

The tale unfolds as follows. The king of Pitre, in modern-day Normandy, has lost his wife. Time has come for him to marry off his daughter, and the townspeople encourage him to do so. The king, however, is reluctant to part with the only other female presence in his life. He then invents a nearly impossible challenge for the suitors: they must climb atop the nearby hill with the daughter in their arms. All suitors try out the
challenge and run out of breath half-way. The daughter then meets and falls in love with a young man who returns her love. One day, the lover says that he can no longer wait and proposes that they run away together. The daughter, unwilling to leave her father, rather proposes that the young man visit her aunt who practices medicine in the town of Salerno in Italy. The suitor is sent off and when he arrives in Salerno the aunt thoroughly examines him and gives him two potions. The first potion helps him return to Pitre more quickly and the second potion is meant to help him climb the hill without running out of breath. The lover returns, takes on the challenge, and, as he is climbing, refuses to drink the potion that his lady is holding in her hand. He falls dead atop the mountain and his beloved, out of grief, falls dead after she pours the potion on the hilltop. The medicine makes the flowers bloom and the community then names the hill after the two lovers.

The first part of the lai sets up a traditional model where a woman plays the object of exchange and rivalry between men. This model frames the lai since the daughter aspires to enter into a marriage alliance. The town’s community expects what tradition prescribes: they want their king’s daughter to be given to a male suitor. Yet, the lai also presents a challenge to this pattern. The king, on the other hand, perpetuates rivalry between himself and his daughter’s future spouse. The king sets up a scenario that symbolically measures the knight’s love for his daughter in comparison with his own. In both structures of relationship, the marriage alliance structure and the structure based on rivalry, the king’s daughter plays a mediating role and she simply functions as object of exchange between men. The daughter, like the townspeople, tries to keep up with tradition, once she turns down her suitor’s initial suggestion to run away.

41 “Romance, on the other hand, consciously makes the role of the exchange of women in the formation of masculine hierarchies within feudal society a central theme” (Gaunt 73-74).
The female medical practitioner’s intervention disturbs the initial reading of the tale in two ways. In the first instance, she represents the possibility for homosocial bonding between women. Thanks to her, the daughter-beloved challenges the king’s and the suitor’s attempt at confining her or making decisions for her. In other terms, initially, the daughter becomes the prize of the challenge set up by her father. The aunt allows for a role reversal so that the daughter can choose her winner. While trying to keep happy her father, her lover, and the townspeople, she attempts to play a more active role and takes charge of her destiny. Furthermore, she initiates exchange with an independent professional woman through her male suitor. Her aunt lives in Salerno, one of the main centers of medical knowledge of the twelfth century. Though she is not officially provided a professional title, she is independent, financially secure, and knowledgeable; we also learn that she practices “l’art de phisike”, or the art of medicine.

En Salerne ai une parente,
Riche femme est, mult a grant rente.
Plus de trente anz i a esté ;
L’art de phisike a tant usé
Que mult est saive de mescines.
Tant cunuist herbes et racines. (103-108)

In “Guigemar,” the list of healing methods mentioned by the doe contains “par herbe ne racine,” also mentioned as a method well known and practiced by the aunt. Whereas in “Guigemar” this method appears in contrast to “par mire,” in this second lai the same method is applied by a woman who is also knowledgeable in “l’art de phisike.” The locality where the aunt practices medicine sheds light on Marie’s epoch and her knowledge of medical practice available to medieval women. The presence of the aunt in Salerno becomes a way for the poetess to underline the value of recognizing fields in
which women can thrive, be influential, and become wealthy while contributing their knowledge and talent to the community. Finke and Schichtman question whether Marie has in mind women becoming new types of patrons and being accumulators and dispensers of wealth. The authors study the two types of patrons found in the lai “Lanval.” King Arthur’s wife plays the traditional type of surrogate patron who mediates relationships between young knights and the king, while Lanval’s fairy mistress is wealthy enough to become an independent dispensor of material and symbolic capital.42 In “lai des deus amanz,” the daughter does, indeed, mediate between men but she also renders her aunt important by forcing her lover to seek the female physician’s diagnosis of their situation.

The healer disturbs the traditional course of events because the love triangle and the triangle of alliance thus lose their importance and focus is placed on the triangular relationship between the aunt, the king’s daughter and her lover. Thanks to the healer, the daughter becomes a more active character in the narrative. Within the initial structures that generate bonds between father and lover, and between townspeople and lover, one finds a triangular relationship between daughter, lover, and maternal aunt where the lover functions as a means for the two women to establish a bond. This connection takes shape thanks to a symbolic and a material exchange. As a material object, the lover is sent from daughter to healer. Then, the aunt examines him and he is returned to Pitre with a potion that is to give him the strength he requires to reach the top of the hill. As mentioned previously, in exchange for the lover, the daughter compensates her aunt with valuable

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42 “The model of woman as surrogate patron, represented by the queen as well as by the great female patrons of the Anglo-Norman period (Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marie de Champagne, Adele of Champagne, Eleanor of Provence, and Eleanor of Castille)—stands in opposition to another model, represented by the fairy mistress” (Finke and Schichtman 17).
materials: clothes, money, horses: “Hastivement s’est aturnez/ de riches dras e de deniers, de palefreize de sumiers” (132-134). The two women also exchange symbolic objects: the aunt’s knowledge and the daughter’s trust. In addition to “escièncie” and trust, writing is exchanged between the two women. The daughter sends a letter with her lover and the aunt sends the potion as a symbol of her knowledge of “herbes et racines” as much as of “phisike” since she also instructs the lover when to drink her concoction.

A Salerne vai sujurner.
A l’ante s’amie parler.
De sa part li duna un brief.
Quand l’ot lit de chief en chief,
Ensemble od li l’a retenu
Tant que tut sun estre a seü.
Par meschine l’a enforcié.
Un tel beivre li a baillié,
Ja ne sera tant travailliez
Ne si ateinz ni si chargiez,
Ne li refrechisse le cors,
Neïs les vaines ne les os,
E qu’il neu ait tute vertu,
Si cum il l’aura beü. (137-150)

The letter and the lover are given to the aunt simultaneously and she examines both “de chief en chief” [from head to toe]. The aunt allows her niece to voice her desire for the chosen lover. This is demonstrated textually by the appearance of the terms “meschine” and “meschine” in rhythmic combinations throughout the lai. The first term, “mesicine” signifies medicine or remedy, while the second term “meschine” translates as young girl. This juxtaposition of phonetically similar terms suggests that the remedy provided by the aunt only finds value in relation to the young girl’s destiny. It then allows us to refer back to Marie’s obligation toward her community. The responsibility of the aunt toward her niece, or the “meschine,” takes on the shape of a potion, a remedy, a “mesicine.”
From the young girl’s perspective, her responsibility toward the community of women takes on the shape of seeking other women’s help. Marie describes the aunt as “une riche femme est, mut a grant rente” translated into modern French by Laurence Harf-Lancner as “une femme influente et fortunée” [a wealthy and influential woman]. This woman’s influence, the text implies, should also be sought out by other women. The notion “a grant rente” or “influence” also creates a mirroring effect with the prologue to the *Lais*, where, after asserting her obligation to share her knowledge, Marie explains that she intends to spread this knowledge so it grows in different places.

Quant un granz bien est oïz
Dunc a primes est il fluriz,
Et quand loëz est de plusieurs,
Dunc a espaniedes ses flurs. (5-8)

Marie has spread her knowledge, metaphorically represented as flowers, once she has successfully reached her community of listeners. This process of “esandre” or spreading implies that her influence should reach different people and spread to different places.

Central to both Marie and the aunt are the diffusion of their knowledge and the influence they wield within their communities. The daughter spreads the potion on the hilltop and, as a result, flowers and herbs grow. The process of spreading the medicine by the daughter resembles Marie’s own intention, mentioned in the Prologue, to spread her work and to let it bloom.

Puis a geté e espandu
Le vessel u li beivre fu
Li munz en fu bien arusez ;
...
Meinte bone herbe i unt trouvée,
Ki del beivre aveint racine. (223-229)
Medicines concocted by women in medieval literature are the result of herbal combinations, of “herbes et racines” more specifically. The daughter pours the potion and perpetuates the eternal sprouting of these same herbs. The narrator specifies, however, that the potion, and by extension, the aunt, is at the root of this process of flowering. The term “racine” [root] can also refer to women’s reproductive attributes, to their being at the root of creation and generation. The text then implicitly displaces this function onto their artistic talent and shows that they can reproduce through knowledge. Through this association, the text asks not only how masculine discourses construct women, but also how women can take on the role of producers and reproducers of discourses on themselves as much as of knowledge and “escïence.” Women can collaborate among themselves in order to create different loci through which to influence society and to help out one another. Rather than proposing a new society based on sisterhood, Marie asks how women’s role can become more important and better recognized. The collaboration between the two women can be read as Marie’s attempt at seeking readerly and writerly collaboration from the feminine community.

In the Prologue, Marie dedicates her book to King Henry. The poet says that from that same king’s heart only stems virtue (“en qui quer tuz biens racine”). The verb “raciner,” means “prendre racine, s’enraciner” in modern French according to Julien Greimas. Laurence Harf-Lancner translates the verb as “donner naissance” and her interpretation of its meaning in Marie’s Lais may then prove the possibility that the poet displaces women’s reproductive function onto their ability to produce, or become the root of knowledge and science. The term also links the aunt to the daughter, since, thanks to the potion, the aunt becomes the means by which the daughter helps her town flourish.
Michaïlova has remarked that “lai des deus amanz” begins with a long description of the town of Pitre while it ends with the townspeople naming the nearby hill after the two lovers. The tale’s beginning and ending show a gradual displacement from valley to hilltop, from the town of Pitre, whose name derives from the king, to the hill which is named after the two lovers. Michaïlova also remarks that ultimately, “le nom de la montagne–nom des deux personnages principaux—est aussi le nom du lai” (106).

Michaïlova suggests that the townspeople chose to name the hilltop after the lovers while Marie chooses to put into writing the protagonists’ adventure. Ultimately, the hilltop and Marie’s Lais keep the tale in memory for the community. The potion then helps generate a bond between Marie, the daughter, and the healer. The healer’s and Marie’s production are at the root of the naming and the commemoration of the couple’s adventure.

As a final note, when the term “racine” is used in relation to King Henry’s heart, it generates an alternative meaning that indirectly relates to the tragic ending of “Lai des deus amanz” and this meaning can only be deciphered through the lai of “Guigemar.” Marie also mentions her own heart in the prologue, stating that she found the desire “en mun quer” to offer her Lais as a gift. Throughout the Lais, parallelisms appear and symbolize equality in suffering, respect, fidelity, or love. The doe and Guigemar are both wounded, the Lady and Guigemar both suffer and are healed by love; in “Lai des deus

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43 “Consacrer dix vers à la région du roi simplement pour “couleur locale” ne semble pas crédible”(Michaïlova 107).
44 “Dans le lai des Deus Amanz, il est deux fois question de la façon dont un lieu est nommé, et deux fois il reçoit le nom des personnages”(Michaïlova 106).
45 “Le déplacement de centre géographique accompagne le glissement du centre de gravité du lai: de la cite à la colline, nous passons du roi au couple des jeunes amants”(Sienaert 110).
46 “Cette nomination est un acte de nomination de l’aventure; elle sera majorée par un acte de mémorisation poétique: la composition d’un lai qui se verra attribuer le même nom. La seule survie de cet amour enterré est dans le nom de la montagne, puis dans le nom du lai”(Michaïlova 110).
amanz” both lovers strive to eschew the father’s challenge, and both die in the end. 47 In a similar fashion, the mention of the king’s heart parallels the mention of Marie’s own heart. As explained above, the notion of flourishing creates a parallelism between the Prologue and “Lai des deus amanz.” Juxtaposing the meaning of racine as “giving root” to virtue through the heart, and “racine” in “Guigemar,” one can possibly understand this term as indirectly referring to both spiritual and physical healings. This reading leads to the understanding that for the poetess, knowledge, and the finished product of “escience,” cannot be of use without a spiritual element that stems from the heart. “Guigemar” exemplifies the combination of spiritual and physical healings taking place almost simultaneously. As remedy, “herbe ne racine” do not work if not applied by the beloved. Furthermore, when Guigemar’s physical wound is healed, he experiences his emotional wounding. William Minkowski mentions that “the medieval hospital was essentially an ecclesiastical facility with staggering mortality rates that encouraged a vision of cure only in the hereafter. For that reason, therapy focused more on the soul than on the body” (289). Guigemar also undergoes a treatment similar to methods practiced by female nurses in medieval hospitals. In this lai, healing by women is thus as much physical in nature as it is spiritual. In Marie’s lais, love explains the spiritual component of wounding and curing.

Contrary to “Guigemar,” however, “Lai des deus amanz” does not focus on the lover’s spiritual transformation. Rather, he is told to drink the aunt’s potion himself and according to the way he chooses to measure his own strength. The problem that leads to the couple’s tragic death also stems from the nature of the challenge. The tale of “Guigemar” also contains a challenge, but one that is a measure for the couple’s love and

47 The daughter diets so as to be lighter while the lover gets the potion.
fidelity rather than of their strength. Meriaduc asks all the knights of his region to try and untie the Lady’s belt (“Puis n’ot el païs chevalier,/ Que il n’I feïst essaier”) and his own sister to try and undo the knot in Guigemar’s shirt (“A la pucele fu bailliee; mes ne l’a mie despleiee” (789-800). The knot symbolizes the couple’s love alliance. In “Lai des deus amanz”, the king’s challenge renders difficult to imagine an ending similar to “Guigemar.”

In “lai des deus amanz,” the narrator criticizes the lover for not knowing the proper “mesure.” This flaw leads the couple to their death. Michaïlova suggests that, like the father, the young man is unable to accept being cut off, separated from his beloved.48 She asks, “pourquoi l’amant reste-t-il sous la loi du père, pourquoi refuse-t-il de boire le philtre, alors qu’il s’était déplacé pour se le procurer et était tout à fait décidé de s’en servir?” (117). The critic does ask the question that puzzles most readers of Marie’s lai, but I believe she falsely interprets the turn of events. The young man actually tries to escape from the father’s control once he suggests that the couple run away. The hero actually stands as an alternative law to that of the father, while the daughter remains under her father’s law and refuses to choose between the two male personae in her life.

Burgess examines the occurrences of the term “mesure” in Marie’s lai. The critic mentions that “mesure” also appears in the lai “Equitan.” “Mesure” takes on a diverse array of meanings. As Burgess mentions, it can mean way, restraint, moderation. The term moderation, however, seems to best fit with Marie’s theory of love. Michaïlova understands “mesure” to relate to “démesure” and thus to moderation and restraint.

Burgess, on the other hand, suggests that the term refers to sensible behavior more than to

48 “le thème, tout au long du récit, n’est pas celui de la démesure de la jeunesse qui paye pour son impétuosité, mais celui de la démesure de l’amour, qu’il soit paternel ou non, et à un niveau plus général, du refus de la coupure” (Michaïlova 116).
moderation and measure, and thus suggesting that the hero must play an active role and be more logical about his strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, the young man must learn to listen to women, the aunt and his beloved, and not underestimate their knowledge and wisdom, their “escience.”

The female protagonist of “Lai des deus amanz” comes to play an active and authoritative role; she uses her lover in order to enter into exchange with her aunt. On the other hand, the figure of the father and that of Marie’s patron come to resemble one another and to show the author’s anxiety about the different interpretations, and misinterpretations of her work. This anxiety explains why Marie focuses on the notion of mesure, since the male personae of her first and sixth lai have a difficult time grasping the proper manner by which to best evaluate their ability to listen to, and to behave towards, the female characters.

*Eliduc*

The titles of “Lai des deus amanz” and “Eliduc” invite us to question constructions of binaries hierarchically structuring heterosexual couples’ relationships, and, more generally, binary structured relationships as opposed to triangular ones. The title of the sixth lai, “lai des deus amanz,” underlines the lovers’ importance, though it never names either one. As shown in the previous section, the narrative’s name is symbolic of the transitional shift of focus from the king of Pitre to the young lovers. The title “Eliduc,” however, focuses on the male knight’s important role and heroic acts. In her prologue to this last lai, Marie specifies that the tale should rather be named after the two female characters Guildeluec and Gilliadun. Michaïlova has analyzed the title

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49 The author says that in this sixth lai, like in Equitan, “again we see that measure is very close to the notion of common sense or understanding”(Burgess 48).
“Eliduc” and argued that it contains a reference to the two women: “Eli-duc, élire entre deux” (243).50 From the onset, the two female protagonists are placed at the forefront. The narrative, indeed, revolves around the knight’s choice between two women. The lai “Eliduc” indeed introduces a more explicit questioning of women’s role and status, even though triangular structures that maintain patriarchal order frame the narrative.

Eliduc is a favorite vassal at the court of the king of Brittany. He is, indeed, the only knight allowed to hunt on the king’s territory. Yet, out of jealousy, a few of Eliduc’s rivals at court begin to spread false rumors about him and turn the king against him. As a result, Eliduc is forced to leave the kingdom. He then leaves his wife, Guildeluëc, in charge of his land and goes off to seek adventure elsewhere. When he arrives in Logres, Great Britain, the hero hears that the king of Exeter is being besieged by another king who wishes to forcefully marry his daughter. Seizing the opportunity, Eliduc fights for the king and helps him win the battle. Meanwhile, the king’s daughter hears of Eliduc and falls in love with him. She sends him two tokens of love: a belt and a ring. Eliduc, also in love with the daughter, fails to control his emotions and finally accepts the lady’s gift despite his promise of faithfulness to his wife. The knight is then summoned by the king of Brittany and forced to return home. He promises Gilliadun to return in one year, and he does, indeed, return in order to kidnap her and bring her back with him to Brittany. On their way back, while they are at sea, a tempest begins to rage and one sailor blames Eliduc for it, since he is betraying his wife. Gilliadun, hearing for the first time that her lover is married, becomes distraught and swoons into a death-like coma. The hero, angered at the sailor’s betrayal, tosses him overboard and into the waves. Eliduc,

50 Michaïlova further comments: “La substance musicale de son nom est une allusion aux deux dames, désignées dans le texte par eles deus” (243).
unwilling to part with his beloved, arrives at shore and instantly builds an abbey in the woods in order to place his beloved’s body within it. Guildeluec, Eliduc’s wife, realizing that her husband has returned unhappy and wanting to find out what is bothering him, asks one of her servants to follow Eliduc. She learns of the chapel in the woods and, when she goes there, she finds Gilliadun within it. While Eliduc’s wife is visiting his beloved inside the abbey, two weasels run inside. The servant kills the male weasel, while the female weasel runs out and returns with a flower that she places on her partner’s lips. In this way, she cures her partner since the male weasel is soon brought back to life. Guildeluec watches the weasel and imitates her actions: she finds the same type of flower that she places on her rival’s lips. Gilliadun then slowly wakes up and tells her adventures. Believing her rival’s words, Guildeluec then decides to become abbess of the chapel built by her husband and to allow her husband and his beloved live together. Later on, Gilliadun joins Guildeluec’s abbey and Eliduc enters into a monastery.

Triangulated relationships that generating male bonding frame this narrative as well. Eliduc struggles between his fidelities to the kings of Brittany and Exeter. He links the two regions by keeping his tie with Exeter while living in Brittany. When he leaves for Exeter and begins a new relationship with the king’s daughter, he subtly questions the nature and benefits of his first marriage. His wife in Brittany is not the daughter of a king and she is thus not as important a figure as the second female character. Marrying the second woman then benefits both Eliduc and the king of Exeter. The knight proves his bravery in battle and becomes a profitable addition to the king’s court. In fact, the king encourages his daughter to meet Eliduc and be hospitable toward him. This second woman renders possible an alliance with Exeter, and the king offers “la tierce part de
s’erité/ e sun tresor abandoné/ pur remaneir.” (629-631). The king of Brittany’s offer, however, rings more interesting since Eliduc “tute la terre guardot” (744). The knight chooses to return and serve in Brittany because he must remain faithful both to the king of the region and to his wife.

The male characters’ political agenda renders necessary an exchange to take place between them. As a result, there appear triangulated structures of relationships that follow a pattern similar to Lévi-Strauss’ alliance theory. Each woman links Eliduc to a specific king and to a specific region and both kings use the knight for his warrior skills. While the king of Exeter wants to marry his daughter to the benefit of his town’s protection, Eliduc evaluates both economic profits and an advantageous political alliance when he chooses his beloved. Like in the previous lai, these two triangles of alliance seem to frame the narrative. Women initially appear to function as objects of exchange and interaction between men.

The lai’s two women play contrasting roles and their coexistence within the tale disturbs the traditional representation of women within medieval romance narratives as exchangeable commodities. So long as Eliduc is well treated by the king of Brittany, he does not see the need to seek the love of another woman. Once Guildeluec marries Eliduc, she can no longer circulate within society. Gilliadun, on the other hand, still has value for the world of knights and kings. As Sienaert states, it is because of Gilliadun “que le roi d’Exeter est impliqué dans une guerre féodale qui tourne mal pour lui” (168). This other female character still generates wars as much as she can help build alliances. Her marriage to Eliduc would prove most profitable to her father. The presence of the two types of women helps shed light on this traditional role assigned to women.
According to a more traditional turn of events, just as in Thomas’ *Roman de Tristan*, one of the two women might have disappeared from the narrative so as to make way for the new couple. Marie does not choose, however, to erase one woman at the expense of the other. The possibility of Gilliadun and Guildeluëc competing over Eliduc no longer exists once the latter saves the life of the former. Michaïlova remarks that “Eliduc n’évoque jamais la possibilité de faire un choix entre les deux femmes, au contraire, il pense et parle en termes d’association. Partagé entre deux serments vassaliques envers deux seigneurs et deux femmes, il essaie de cumuler les charges” (242). Eliduc does indeed make an attempt at linking the different elements of his life. Yet, the fact that he abducts the daughter of the king of Exeter and brings her back with him to Brittany rather shows that he makes a choice between the two kings but not between the two women in his life.

The healing episode renders possible the interaction between healer, lover, and the unconscious beloved. Eliduc seeks advice from the townspeople and, unexpectedly, the choice he is to make is decided by his wife. Unlike in Thomas’ *Tristan* where rivalry and jealousy instigate one Iseut to lead to the second Iseut’s death, in “Eliduc” collaboration rather ties the two women to each other and pushes the knight to mediate between women. The knight is reduced thus to the status of object enabling bonding and collaboration between Gilliadun and Guildeluëc. On the other hand, Guildeluëc, and not the king of Exeter, functions as the active subject enabling the exchange of Gilliadun.

Fitz comments on the contrast made by Marie between *sage gens du païs* and *sage femme* in the healing episode. The healer is referred to as the *sage femme* because of her wise

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51 “The council, which Eliduc sought from the *sage gent du païs*, has come from or rather through, his *sage femme*, who makes it possible to build an abbey where the woodland chapels stand” (Fitz 548).
decision to bring to life her rival. Fitz says, “The French term for midwife (sage femme), anachronistically but felicitously, describes Guildeluëc’s actions during the weasel episode” (548). Though it would be dangerous to apply the more contemporary definition of the term *sage femme* to Marie’s text, it would be possible to comment on Marie’s purposeful double attribution of the notion of *sage*, meaning wise, first to the townspeople then to Eliduc’s wife. The wise advice that the male character seeks from other male characters should ultimately come from his wife. Once more, the reader can decipher Marie’s anxiety about her own role as a female writer. She consistently advises male characters of her story to seek advice and guidance from women rather than from men.

Gilliadun faints because she hears about Guildeluëc, and thus her coma provides a choice and a voice for her rival. By healing the beloved, Guildeluëc exchanges trust, collaboration, and “escience.” In exchange, Guildeluëc and Eliduc give her land and friendship.  

52 Like Marie herself, Eliduc’s wife literally gives breath, and voice, to the other woman by giving her a “flur,” flower. She learns from a weasel and directly applies this acquired knowledge to cure another woman. Deborah Nelson sees a connection between the weasel and the Virgin Mary, a connection that the critic finds in the fourteenth century *Ovide Moralisé* (Nelson 41): “The weasel becomes significant and implies a subtle celestial intervention to aid Guildeluëc in her role as the redeemer of Eliduc’s salvation” (42). Reading Marie’s work as simply a morally charged narrative of salvation, however, would limit the many possibilities of interpretation that the text makes available to its reader.  

53 The healing scene rather reminds us of Marie’s anxiety

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52 “De sa terre li doint partie/ u ele face une abeïe”(1125-1126).
53 “As [Marie] is aware, the question of reception implies a loss of control, a danger”(Bloch 11).
about the reception of her work. The desire for exchange of knowledge and capital between women, the lack of understanding and attention to women’s wise words by male figures, show the author’s perspective on her own role as teller of tales. Howard Bloch claims that Marie has written a writerly text,54 and the lai of “Eliduc” helps prove this assertion thanks to the healing scene contained within it. Learning from the weasel, and directly applying this symbolic object to cure another person, Guildeluëc then learns the value of “escience,” and this knowledge leads to her decision to live a secluded life of learning in the abbey. Once having exchanged knowledge, represented by the flower, the healer makes a conscious choice to spread farther the thirst for knowledge initially generated by the weasel.

From the first to the last lais analyzed in this chapter, we perceive a gradual progression in terms of the amount of authority Marie gives her female protagonists. In “lai des deux amanz,” the king’s daughter mediates an exchange of capital between her lover and the healer. In “Eliduc,” Guildeluëc runs a convent and thus comes to own land and property. In the end, both female protagonists join the abbey. “Ensemble od sa femme premiere/ mist sa femme que tant ot chiere” (1165-1166). Positioned at the end of the Harley manuscript, “Eliduc” better illustrates how healing can ideally strengthen bonds between women and provide them ways to find alternative lifestyles to that of the beloved and the wife.55 Healing exemplifies one practical way that “escience” can be spread in the community thanks to wise women. This final lai of the Harley collection

54 “It is as if [Marie] were saying that authorship lies in that which writers choose not to say as well as in what they say, which means that her revelation of a name and nothing more stands as a conscious choice: Marie sets the limits of obscurity, calibrates the gap between what we know and what he do not know of her, negotiates the degree of her anonymity” (Bloch 11).
55 “Marie also complicates the gender relations implied by this model of patronage, considering the aristocratic woman’s ability to accumulate and dispense capital within such a homosocial world” (Finke and Schichtman 489).
then complements the second and sixth lais because in it, the practice of healing by a
female character drastically changes the traditional course of events. The abbey, like
Marie’s work, is indeed representative of a locus through which women can both produce
and obtain “escience.”
CHAPTER THREE

Parodying Genre and Gender: Nicolette's Naked Limb and Her Dexterous Hands

*Aucassin et Nicolette*, a thirteenth-century *chantefable*, is written in verse and prose alternately, and it is the story of Aucassin and his beloved Nicolette. The story begins with the war between Garin, count of Beaucaire and the hero Aucassin’s father, and Count Bougar de Valence. The story takes place in the south of France, in the Languedoc region, where Occitan was the common vernacular language, and it was written either during or right after the Albigensian Crusade (1208-1229). The towns of Valence and Beaucaire were under the rule of Count of Toulouse. In fact, Raymond VII of Toulouse was born in the town of Beaucaire (Pegg 150). Furthermore, during the Crusades, the inhabitants of Beaucaire helped the counts of Toulouse and for the first time the Pope’s army’s greatest militant, Simon de Monfort, was thus defeated in 1216.56 The author enjoys toying with notions of duality, as his work alternates between prose and verse, as his protagonists are of two different identities, one from Beaucaire, the other from Cartagena, Spain. The town of Beaucaire is a place of struggle between northern and southern France and, as a river port, it connects the regions of Provence, Catalonia, and Toulouse to the growing Capetian kingdom administered from the north.

The author called his work a *chantefable*, the only one in its genre, and it differs from traditional romance because verse and prose alternate. The narrative’s taboo love affair between the Saracen slave Nicolette and Aucassin from Beaucaire generates suspense and we find, indeed, a consistent play on dualism. Nicolette encompasses this

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56 “The rising at Beaucaire in favor of Raymond’s son, which Simon could not repress, then broke the de Monfort reputation for invincibility” (Roquebert 7). Roquebert refers to Raymond VI’s son, Raymond VII.
dualism, and her presence within the narrative brings out paradoxes that would otherwise seem less evident. She is twice endowed with healing powers in this *chantefable*. At times, she is described as a passive persona, who heals miraculously. In another episode, however, she actively practices healing. As a passive figure, Nicolette is implicated in two different discourses of the female healer. The first discourse replicates discourses found in medieval courtly poetry where the beloved female functions as a healing object for the poet's love wound. The second discourse, which echoes medieval narratives, displaces the curing power of the woman onto a beast. Comparing examples where Nicolette is associated with these aspects of passive healing, as well as an example where Nicolette actively performs healing, allows us to propose a new reading of the role of masculine and feminine gender roles in *Aucassin et Nicolette*.

Specifically, juxtaposing the different healing episodes reveals the fact that when Nicolette actively practices healing, she poses challenges to normative gender roles. In the beginning, the author introduces the patriarchal society of Beaucaire. Nicolette’s godfather and Aucassin's father exemplify this order, by keeping the couple apart for political reasons. Aucassin tries to challenge the order, yet his naïve attitude at times shows that he also agrees with the man-woman binary. The first healing episode fits within this first framework. The second healing scene, however, in which Nicolette plays a more active role, introduces a chain of role reversals that then help put into question this patriarchal order as well as the normative gender roles it reinforces. The Lévi-Straussian alliance theory, as it applies to the structure of the political interactions in this narrative, provides a possible explanation for Nicolette's paradoxical positioning and for her relationship with other female figures. At the end of the narrative, the women who
collaborate with Nicolette help weaken the strength of the patriarchal order. Drawing on the Lévi-Straussian alliance theory, the Girardian theory of desire, as well as theories of homosocial relations helps to show the importance of the second healing scene in *Aucassin et Nicolette*.

**The Healing Powers of Nicolette's “Ganbete”**

The initial reference to healing is evoked by Aucassin while he is imprisoned by his father, and while he is speaking about Nicolette's beauty. In chapter 9, Aucassin sings of Nicolette in a poem that encompasses religious and lyric discourses on femininity.

"Nicolette, flors de lis,
Douce amie o le cler vis,
...
L'aut'ier vi un pelerin,
Nés estoit de Limosin,
Malades de l'esvertin,
Si gisoit ens un lit,
Mout par estoit entrepris,
De grant mal amaladis.
Tu passas devant son lit,
Si soulevas ton train
Et ton peliçon ermin,
La cemisse de blanc lin,
Tant que ta ganbete vit:
Garis fu li pelerins
Et tos sains, ainc ne fu si.
Si se leva de son lit,
Si rala en son païs,
Sains et saus et tos garis.
Doce amie, flors de lis. (11.12-32)

This passage fits within the beginning section of the narrative. It follows Aucassin's refusal to obey his father. The count of Beaucaire threatens to burn Nicolette and her adoptive father, the viscount, if she does not leave town, and the viscount thus hides her in a tower. Furthermore, because Aucassin refuses to stay away from his beloved, the count imprisons him in a dungeon. The couple's marriage poses a problem because of her
foreign origin, and because she has been bought as a slave. For the parental figures of Beaucaire, marriage thus has a political function. The couple's relationship is decided by male figures of the community. The count and viscount decide against Aucassin and Nicolette’s marriage for their own reasons.

This poem, sung by Aucassin while he is in prison, compares to poems written in the style of the *canso*. In this type of poetry, the poet-lover is separated from his lady and, within this tradition, troubadour poets often evoke the theme of *amor de lonh*, or love from a distance. They complain of the impossibility of overcoming the distance separating them from the lady of their *canso*. Aucassin also sings his poem once in prison and separated from Nicolette. Belonging to this genre of writing, Aucassin's poem borrows the genre's representation of women.

In addition, Aucassin’s song resembles medieval poems that depict the lady, named the *domna*, as a healing persona. The example of the pilgrim in the poem shows that the mere sight of Nicolette's body can have miraculous, curative outcomes and not only for Aucassin, but for the male community at large.57 Aucassin claims here, as he did in the case of the pilgrim, that Nicolette’s body can cure his illness and sadness. He refers to Nicolette as "flor de lis", notably the term "lis" in Old French also means "blessé" or "wounded."58 Rather than evoking the effect of Nicolette's beauty on him, Aucassin borrows the tale of a pilgrim healed by Nicolette.

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57 The anonymous author may also be making reference to first troubadour poet, William IX’s “Farai un vers pos mi sonelh.” In this poem, William IX pokes fun at aristocratic women who, according to Pierre Bec, “préfèrent les clercs aux chevaliers” (184). The story unfolds as follows: Count William, dressed as a pilgrim, is on his way to “Alvernehe, part Limozi” when he runs into two women, the wives of Sir Garin and Sir Bernard. He pretends to be mute and so the two women do with him as they please for several days.

The scene seems to poke fun at miracle healing by means of voyeurism. The refraction of Aucassin's gaze through the pilgrim's gaze determines Nicolette's gender role in terms of a masculine gaze. Because Aucassin embodies a knight and the pilgrim represents a presumably devout person, Nicolette's gender role comes to be defined by the conjunction of lyric and religious discourses on femininity. Both lyric troubadour poetry and religious texts include instances of miraculous healing brought about by female figures. In terms of lyric poetry, Tony Hunt and Joseph E. Garreau have both correlated the theme of healing in Aucassin's poem to an instance of this same theme in the first troubadour poet, Guillaume IX's poem, “mout jauzens me prenc en amar.” Because healing remains a trope in such instances, the woman comes to gain healing attributes rather than being a healer. She is more the cure than the healer, and the distinction between healing practitioner and curative medicine becomes blurred. In a similar fashion, Nicolette takes a passive role and is objectified through Aucassin's gaze.

Furthermore, attributing miraculous powers to Nicolette's body has the paradoxical effect of reducing her to her bodily functions. She then fits into the medieval dichotomy that correlates men to spirit and women to body. Aucassin defends this stand in a later passage when he argues with Nicolette that she cannot love him more than he loves her since "li amors de le femme est en son œul et en son cateron de sa mamele et en

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60 “Par son joy pot malautz sanar,/E par sa ira sas morir/et savis hom enfolezir/et belhs hom sa beutat muda” (25-28).
61 “The inferiority that medieval culture generally imposed on femaleness, like the superiority it conferred on maleness, stems from the primary meaning attributed to the female/male pair: the relationship of body to spirit. The Middle Ages inherited from Greek culture, especially from Platonic philosophy, a deep distrust of mortal flesh, especially in contrast with the immortal soul. The corruptible body seemed to exemplify moral corruption. But the soul, sharing in God's eternal existence, participated in divinity. Since women's primary function in classical and medieval societies was motherhood (men, although fathers, were not limited to that role), they were identified with the bodily functions of conception and birth, and with the body generally. Viewed as more fleshy than men, women stood for all that the modern word carnal suggests: unlawful sexuality, sin, and death” (Potkay and Evitt 5).
son l'orteil del pié, mais li amors de l'oume est en ens el cué planteé, dont ele ne puet iscir" (14.22-25). In this chapter, the couple argues about who can love the other more. As Aucassin begins to reveal to Nicolette how much he loves her, she replies that "je ne quit mie que vous m'amés tant con vos dites; mais je vos aim plus que vos ne faciés mi" (14.16-18). Aucassin provides the above-mentioned counter-argument and thus borrows from discourses on men and women to show that Nicolette's claim is impossible. Unfortunately, she is not given a chance to respond, since she is forced to flee from Beaucaire. Because Aucassin has the last word, he defines the relationship in terms of discourses that reinforce normative gender roles. He provides a comical medico-physiological explanation for the differences between men and women so as to prove valid the hierarchically structured binary opposition between men and women. Yet, Nicolette's claim, and her silence, bring about an ironic tone that generates a questioning of Aucassin's claim.

The fact remains that in this first part of the narrative, Aucassin reiterates religious and lyric discourses that serve to objectify women, and to reduce them to the status of body. When he claims that her "ganbete", or ankle, has miraculous and magical powers, he reduces her to an isolated body part, that only appears as a form of medicine for the ill male seeking some form of salvation. In fact, the term "garis," which appears twice in Aucassin's poem, means both "to heal" and "to save" in Old French. Jane Burns points out this form of discourse on femininity found in twelfth-century literature: "Twelfth century romance narrators often paint portraits of idealized feminine beauty that suggest posed statues rather than flesh. The fetichized bodies of romance heroines are typically frozen in description of isolated body parts" (Burns 110). Nicolette's body is
also represented in such a way: she takes the pose of a statue, she appears frozen and her "ganbete," her limb, takes on an idealized form through the universalized masculine gaze.

In religious discourse, the mere presence of women, because of their beauty and sensuality, generates sin, while miraculous healing attributes are also ascribed to the female body, like in the case of the Virgin Mary. An analogy can be made between Nicolette and the tale of Marie L'Égyptienne.

After years of prostitution in Alexandria, Mary makes her way to Jerusalem aboard a ship of pilgrims. Her presence on this ship completely disrupts holy mission and shows how vulnerable the sacred is to the profane. When Mary's body (for we have to speak of Mary's body here: that is the disruptive force) enters into the ship on its sacred mission, the pilgrims fall under her charm. The entire ship is infected by the sexual contagion and Mary pays for her passage by sleeping with as many pilgrims as possible. (Semple 167)

Nicolette and the Egyptian Mary share the powerful effect of their body upon pilgrims and other male figures. Benjamin Semple has interpreted this effect according to religious understandings of masculine and feminine gender identities:"The concept of the sacred body can lead us into one of those binarisms with which Christianity was filled: body and soul, dead and living, damned and saved, letter and spirit, profane and sacred. And female and male" (Semple 164). The critic states that religious references to women's bodies emphasize the negative effect of these bodies on men, and he notices that the narrator of the tale compares the Egyptian Mary to an illness that infects the pilgrims. In this respect, Mary’s tale thus differs greatly from Nicolette's tale. Though Aucassin focuses on the effect of Nicolette's body both on himself and on the pilgrim, the focus is rather placed on the medicinal attributes of Nicolette's body as opposed to its contagious attributes.
From Aucassin's description of Nicolette’s miraculous limb brings her closer to the figure of the Virgin Mary than the Egyptian Mary. In a fourteenth century manuscript entitled *Miracles de Notre Dame* and written by a Dominican poet, herbal metaphors are used to describe the healing power of the Virgin. The Virgin stands at the threshold between healer and medicine because she is a passive vehicle. This same fact can be extracted from Aucassin's representation of Nicolette as healer. Yet, unlike the Virgin Mary and the Egyptian Mary, Nicolette does not seek to admit the noxious effect of her being, but rather, by taking on an active role, automatically rejects to be classified by discourses like that of Aucassin that merely bestowed miraculous attributes upon her body, and that reduce her to her body parts. The couple's argument in chapter 14 initiates this process of questioning of Nicolette's status.

In the first part of the narrative, Nicolette’s function is also to mediate homosocial exchanges. Aucassin's poem generates two triangular relationships. The first relationship is established between Aucassin and the pilgrim through their desire for Nicolette. This structure compares to René Girard's triangle of desire according to which Nicolette functions as the object of desire while the pilgrim represents the model whose desire is then imitated by Aucassin. The healing metaphor symbolizes Aucassin's imitation of the pilgrim's desire. In other words, Aucassin can only justify the reason for loving Nicolette by being physiologically affected by her. Her effect upon both her lover and the pilgrim creates a bond between the two men, and as the shared object of their desire, she enables Aucassin to draw closer to the pilgrim.

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Aucassin, the author of the chantefable, and the male audience, also establish a bond thanks to Nicolette. In the prologue, the poet promises to heal his readers of their suffering:

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Qui vauroit bons vers oïr
Del deport du viel antif
De dues biaux enfans petis,
Nicholette et Aucassins,
De gran pains qu'il soufri
Et des prouesces qu'il fist
Por s'amie o le cler vis?
Dox est li cans, biaux li dis
Et cortois et bien asis:
Nus hom n'est si esbahis,
Tant dolans ni entrepris,
De grant mal amaladis,
Se il l'oit, ne soit garis
Et de joie resbaudis,
Tant par est douce. (1.1-15)
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The author attributes the adjective "douce" to his tale, just as Aucassin attributes the same term to Nicolette in his poem. In fact, critics have wondered whether the term "douce" in the last verse of the prologue, "tant par est douce," refers to Nicolette or to the narrative, or to both simultaneously (Brownlee 169). Since the poet tells us that his male protagonist, Aucassin, is defined by his "prouesce" and by the "gran pains qu'il souffri" for his beloved, one can assume that the term "douce" is a reference to Nicolette's nature as much as the healing reference in the prologue foreshadows references to Nicolette's healing powers in the text. The term "garis," used both in the prologue and in Aucassin's poem, also links the author to his male protagonist. As Sara Kay puts it, through this connection, "the text here acts as a lifted hem that invites us to look up it" (Kay 4). The author correlates the miraculous effect of his text to the miraculous effect of Nicolette's naked "ganbete". Reading the text from this angle renders evident the homosocial bond
generated between the author, Aucassin, the pilgrim, and the presumably male audience. Just as Aucassin's desire for Nicolette is defined by the pilgrim's gaze upon Nicolette's leg, the poet invites the reader to desire both Nicolette and the text’s soothing effect by taking Aucassin as a model. Aucassin's reference to the gaze of the pilgrim upon Nicolette's body, and the parallelism apparent between the poem and the prologue, have the effect of immobilizing Nicolette's body, so as to undermine any power healing might be able to provide her. The act of healing can provide agency and an active role for the female protagonist while her immobilized body, when endowed with the power to heal by the masculine gaze, rids her of her autonomy and of her active role.

Aucassin sings to Nicolette while in prison and the circumstances that lead to him singing render visible yet another bond established between men thanks to Nicolette. The poem, evoking an *amor de lonh*, or a far-away love, addresses Aucassin's situation. As mentioned previously, the count and viscount of Beaucaire separate the couple for political reasons. As soon as the count threatens to burn Nicolette and her father, the viscount imprisons her in a tower. Nicolette’s father never gives her the opportunity to defend herself, nor to disobey her father's orders. Aucassin, on the other hand, argues with his father, and goes to battle for him specifically because he is promised a kiss from Nicolette. Because of Aucassin's insistence, the count then imprisons him in the dungeon. This last structure of interaction between men follows the rules of the Lévi-Straussian alliance theory. For the sake of survival, kinship groups, or male members within these groups, exchange women with other groups. Women, and marriage, serve the purpose of helping groups build alliances in order to protect or defend themselves. Ultimately, for Aucassin's father, the couple's marriage brings no advantage, and is thus unacceptable
since the count hopes that his son will marry a person of his own social status. Nicolette ultimately has a negative influence on Aucassin who disobeys his father and on her own father who is threatened by the count. She stands at the center of all their quarrels and creates tension between the male figures around her.

The viscount has a different opinion about why their marriage is not advantageous since he also wishes that his daughter marry a person of her own social status, and because he does not believe that Aucassin has honest intentions toward Nicolette. When Aucassin goes in search of Nicolette, he is told by the viscount not to approach her. Because the viscount assumes that Aucassin's sole intention is to make of Nicolette his "maitresse" or "concubine", he warns Aucassin of the ill fate that would await him in hell. Aucassin's initial response is that he will be happy wherever he goes as long as he is with Nicolette. He then gives a list of those who are bound to end in paradise and he claims that he would not be happy among the holier members of society. In his response, he implies that his relationship with her goes beyond "concubinage," and that the couple will be together even in heaven or hell. The poem, and the reference to the pilgrim, generate a contrast between Aucassin’s mental and physical strengths. He is not afraid of going to battle while in love with Nicolette, yet he is unable to regain strength when separated from his beloved. The poem reinforces Aucassin’s claim that he has pure intentions toward Nicolette, yet, he paradoxically reduces Nicolette's rights by couching his desire for her in binary terms consonant with both patriarchal order and Christian norms. We discover at the end of the narrative, that Aucassin's initial feeling that Nicolette is of noble birth explains his attraction toward her. Aucassin voices his choice for Nicolette, yet he is forced to live Aucassin's father's patriarchal order and the count does not allow
him to marry Nicolette. The viscount, being under the count's rule, would endanger himself and his wife by allowing his daughter to see Aucassin.

Between the three male figures, Nicolette becomes a commodity that has been devalued. Her position in the couple's relationship depends upon male figures' decision. Nicolette flees the city because of Aucassin's father's threat to burn her. Her adoptive father has already thought of a "baceler qui du pain gaegnat par honor" (4.13-14). While the count wants her to vanish entirely, the viscount wants to avoid danger by setting her up with a “baceler” of lesser rank. The viscount, being under Aucassin’s father’s rule, has no choice but to obey orders. Finally, Aucassin has already made his choice of Nicolette; he tells his mother that she is noble because she "est de bon boin aire"; and that "bien est drois que s'amor aie,/ que trop est douc" (4.18). He argues, then, that his love remains valid because he believes her to be of noble birth. Aucassin also confines Nicolette's position to that of an object of exchange. It maintains Nicolette's status as long as she remains in Beaucaire. Indeed, as Nicolette flees from the town, she says that between being burned in Beaucaire or being eaten alive by animals in the forest, she would rather escape into the forest. She then abandons the patriarchal order while Aucassin remains within his town and passively mourns her departure.

Speech, and the Healing Beast

In chapter eighteen, we find another reference to Nicolette as figurative healer. In this section, however, Nicolette herself makes reference to healing. When her discourse on the female healing practitioner is juxtaposed with Aucassin's discourse, it complicates the establishment of normative gender roles brought about by lyric and religious discourses on femininity. While Aucassin's poem generates a universal, idealized
representation of women as objects constructed by the male gaze for and male desire,

Nicolette's prose description differs from Aucassin’s mention of healing in his poem in
that the healer individuates her relationship with Aucassin. Despite such discrepancy
Nicolette's description still generates a discourse that respects the hierarchically
structured dichotomy between masculine and feminine gender roles.

The mention of Nicolette as healer appears in a chapter written in prose and the
description functions as a coded message told by Nicolette to the shepherds situated near
the forest. Promising compensation to the shepherds for transferring the message, she
provides Aucassin a way to find her. In order to hide her identity, she says that Aucassin
should hunt "une beste en ceste forest" that can cure his love-wound, and in order to test
Aucassin's love, she warns that he should hunt the creature within three days or his
wound will never be healed:

----Le beste a tel mecine que Aucassins ert garis de son mehaing; et j'ai ci cinc
sous en ma borse: tenés, se li dites; et dedens trois jors li covient cacier, et se il
dens trois jors ne le trove; ja mais n'iert garis de son mehaig. (18.32-36)

The shepherds convey a slightly modified message to Aucassin:

----si nos dona tant del sien que nos li eumes en covent, se vos veniés ci, nos vos
disien que vous alissiés cacier en ceste forest, qu'il i a une beste que, se vos le
poïés prendre, vos n'en donriés mie un des membres por cinc cens mars d'argent
ne por nul avoir; car li beste a tel mecine que, si vos le poës prendre, vos serés
garis de vos mehaig; et dedens trois jors le vos coviens avoir prisse, et se vos ne
l'avés prise, ja mais ne le verrés. (22.35-43)

The slightly transformed version of the message conveyed by the shepherds loses its
emphasis on the permanence of Aucassin's lovesickness. They tell Aucassin that if he
does not hunt the beast within three days, he will no longer see it, rather than reminding
him that he may never be cured if he does not find it. The shepherds, like Aucassin, place
emphasis on the act of seeing rather than on the curing process.

The hunting theme derives from Celtic mythology and appears in literature in two
distinct forms. The legendary figure of the white stag is hunted in the forest by Arthurian
heroes63 while, according to Arthurian legend, the white doe, or “the hind of the fairies,”
helps Arthur reach Morgan Le Fay.64 Reference to hunting also appears in Marie de
France’s lai “Guigemar.” In the forest, Guigemar’s arrow that has hit a white hind returns
to wound him. The animal then tells him that only his love can heal him. Nicolette and
the shepherds are both familiar with this type of healing, which appears frequently in
medieval mythology and establishes the traditional dichotomy of hunter and hunted.
Nicolette situates herself in the position of hunted while expecting Aucassin to hunt her.
Meanwhile, the three-day time span offered is a means for her to test Aucassin's love.

Just as in the case of Aucassin's poem, a triangular relationship appears between
Nicolette, the shepherd-messenger, and Aucassin. She is, indeed, the initial creator of the
message, yet the shepherd is the actual person making the transfer to the recipient of the
message. His role is similar to that of the author who conveys Nicolette's story for his
readers. The shepherd, a male figure, thus intervenes and modifies Nicolette's words. The

63 “Unsurprisingly, a white stag features in a number of Celtic stories, for the Celts (along with many other
cultures) held the white stag as an especially mystical animal that was thought to have originated in the
Otherworld. Arthurian tradition said that whoever hunted down a white stag could demand a kiss from the
loveliest girl at Arthur’s court. Sagremor was reported as having hunted one in Rigomer, while in Erec et
Enide one was hunted in the Forest of Adventure. Perceval was said to have beheaded a white stag in the
Didot Perceval, while Floriant was said to have been brought by one to the castle of his foster mother,
Morgan Le Fay” (Dixon-Kennedy 407).

64 “In the Arthurian romance La Caccia by Erasmo de Valvasone, this deer-like animal led Arthur through
a mountain to Morgan Le Fay’s palace, where the King was shown the heavens and the earth in order to
guide his future destiny” (Dixon-Kennedy 219).
shepherd changes the focus of the message by placing emphasis on the act of seeing Nicolette rather than on Nicolette curing Aucassin.65

According to Nicolette, however, the message, like the beast, has curing attributes as well as an economic value—it is worth "cinq sous". The economic and curing attributes, transferred from discourse onto text, reminds us of the healing values attributed to the text by the poet in the prologue. He tells us that listening to the tale of the two lovers cures all listeners of their psychological and physical illnesses. The author thus sells his story by arguing for its medicinal attributes. Both Nicolette and the anonymous author perceive their message as having healing attributes. The shepherd and Aucassin, on the other hand, reduce Nicolette to the same status as the message and the beast.

This new discourse presents a challenge to femininity's representation in masculine discourse. First, Nicolette appropriates the description of healing previously appropriated by Aucassin. Unlike Aucassin's poem that reiterates a traditional view of women, Nicolette's words illustrate the pragmatic function of speech, particularly around healing. In other words, she speaks Aucassin’s language, she uses her lover’s discourse on healing to convey a message. By doing so, she shows that speech has a political or a financial function and she thus decodes the ideological effects of speech. Healing generates parallelisms between the author’s prologue, Aucassin’s poem, and Nicolette’s coded message conveyed to the shepherds and in this way it allows the reader to view the entire romance as a message with healing attributes.

65 Perhaps that the author is indirectly alluding to Aucassin’s poem, more specifically to the sight of Nicolette’s limb.
Furthermore, because Nicolette only has Aucassin in mind as her intended audience, her language has a more specific focus and so avoids producing a generalized, universal discourse on femininity. Through her speech, Nicolette endows herself with a more active role. In her message, she positions herself as the hunted and healing prey and shows that she is aware of other discourses on the theme. By this, she implies that she can only protect and take care of Aucassin if he steps in her direction, or more bluntly, if he follows the path that she has set up for him. In Marie de France's "Guigemar," the arrow that wounds the prey returns and also wounds the hunter. Nicolette does not intend to wound her hunter, though Aucassin does wound himself by falling off his horse. She does, however, describe herself as the prey that, like in Marie de France’s lai, would be able to heal the knight-lover. Intertextual reference to the themes of healing and hunting allow Nicolette to use the available tools to build an alliance with Aucassin. Her speech is a code kept secret from the shepherd and it focuses on the changing role of both Aucassin and herself at this point of the narrative.

Nicolette tries to seduce Aucassin by using his own metaphors for women. Aucassin uses healing as a catalyst to lament his separation from Nicolette. The effect of this upon Nicolette is for her to accept Aucassin's word as a code for the two of them to secretly communicate. Aucassin universalizes and essentializes Nicolette's beauty in his poem, and the miraculous cure benefits all male figures, including the pilgrim and the poet's audience. Nicolette's words, on the other hand, reappropriate this language and use it as a code; Nicolette accepts Aucassin's idealization of her beauty and her femininity only because it allows the two of them to communicate with one another.
Nicolette's prediction that Aucassin will hunt her in the forest seems odd since Aucassin acts more as a passive lover than an active one. As Brownlee has rightly remarked, the two times that Aucassin and Nicolette meet result from Nicolette's actions and strategies. Given Aucassin's nature, it seems quite contradictory for Nicolette to expect him to hunt her. It also seems humorous and ironic for her to use the hunting metaphor when speaking about her interaction with Aucassin since it undermines his status as male. Jane Gilbert understands Nicolette's use of the hunter/hunted binary as an example of her struggle with her dual identity. While she acts as a "Belle Sarrasine," she tries to deny this aspect of her identity and to conform more to the "Good Christian Girl" persona. Knowing that Aucassin will not be the chaser and she the chased, Nicolette still struggles to represent her relationship with her lover along these lines (Gilbert 223). Her reference to the beast automatically adds paradox to the hunter/hunted binary and shows that it is a metaphor for the hierarchy that structures heterosexual relationships. She automatically takes on an active role in the process of playing the hunted, rather than being hunted. The discourse on healing uttered by Nicolette can be seen as foreshadowing the healing scene in the forest.

**Nicolette Performs Surgery**

The final reference to healing appears after Aucassin enters into the forest. This episode represents a middle point in the entire narrative and it establishes a contrast between the reunited couple’s adventures in Beaucaire and their adventures in Torelore and Cartagena. Within the economy of the narrative, this *topos* marks the transition from an opening section that resembles more the romance and epic genres and a closing

66 "It is Nicolette who effects both reunions, who successfully overcomes the obstacles presented by the two externally imposed separations" (Brownlee 171).
section that ventures into the genre of the carnavalesque and into the world of the "merveilleux." These divisions and juxtapositions do not appear in a drastic or clearly delineated way, though the section after the forest does feature noticeable reversals in terms of roles for Nicolette and Aucassin: when the couple arrives in Torelore, they witness a reversal of roles between the king and his wife. This novelty affects the couple and they become aware of the roles that they are playing themselves. The healing scene in the forest thus initiates a process of questioning how Nicolette's role can fit within the masculine and feminine categories.

In this episode, the *topos* of the forest replaces the *topos* of the town of Beaucaire. The division between town and forest parallels to the division between seclusion and integration. Nicolette is chased from Beaucaire and finds refuge in this space of nature. That topos often appears in religious texts and Old French romance. Jacques LeGoff has examined the similarity between forest and desert in medieval literature and noticed that both spaces evoke an atmosphere of seclusion and isolation, as they do in the Old Testament.67 This *topos* incarnates either seclusion or an emptying process. Within the economy of the narrative, Nicolette undergoes transformation. She is adopted, raised in Beaucaire and turned Christian, and, in the end, she returns to her roots, realizing that she is the daughter of a Sarracen king. This evolution renders possible her marriage with Aucassin. In the forest, she must undo herself of all social belonging and reformulate her religious, ethnic, and gender identities. In that episode, she belongs neither to the Christian community, nor to the Sarracen culture.

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67 Pour la forêt c'est *gaste*, vide, aride, et proche de la forêt sont les substantives *gast* et *gastine*, lieux L'épithète de nature incultes, landes forestières” (LeGoff 68).
The forest and the hut constructed by Nicolette symbolize her space as well as the moment of her identity crisis. She is still unaware of her own lineage, though we are told from the start that she is of Sarracen origin. As stated previously, she flees Beaucaire because of Aucassin's father's threat. When she flees the city, she also escapes the bonds that bind Aucassin to that same patriarchal order of Beaucaire and the triangular relationships that she mediates.

While waiting for Aucassin in the forest, she constructs a hut that represents the reconstruction of her own identity. Perhaps Nicolette's transformation reveals the author's questioning of the process of christianization of the Sarracen regions. Regardless of the reasons for Nicolette's seclusion, she remains to the very end entangled in the bonds between men, though her transformation disturbs the *status quo*. Yet, while she is in the forest, the hut comes to figure as a social space where masculine bonds do not exist. This in-between space allows her to play a more active role.

The forest also represents a space of nature, as opposed to a cultural space. If Beaucaire can be conceived as representing "culture" in the Lévi-Straussian sense of the term, then the forest symbolizes a return to "nature" for Nicolette. According to the alliance theory, exchanges between different tribes provide strength and protection for survival. The alliance between different kinship groups then generates the transition from nature to culture (Lévi-Strauss 53). These groups exchange women and commodities. In *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the forest represents a space in which the heroine can put into question her own role as object of exchange. If Nicolette constructs the hut as her own cultural space, then she also creates the possibility of building an alliance with Aucassin.
according to her system of exchange. She offers her knowledge of surgery, she heals Aucassin, because she intends to marry him.

The forest can be representative of the transition from culture to nature in the way that gender is constructed within a social space. A person's sex being a biological component that society associates with gender, the return to nature would then symbolize a return to a space in which this association is put into question. When Aucassin correlates Nicolette to the parts of her body that are attractive to the male gaze, he socially defines her femininity according to discourses of Christian texts and literary works. The episode in the forest disturbs the need for a return to conventional norms and to the patriarchal order. The forest, and Nicolette’s hut, become spaces within which the heroine can question and redefine her own role in relation to her lover before their eventual return to Beaucaire.

Nicolette's gender identity can be understood through the types of femininity that she embodies. Beaucaire and Cartagena encompass the two parts of Nicolette's identity. This in-between space provides her an opportunity to question her gender identity and ethnic origin. Jane Gilbert, as previously mentioned, explains her active role in the narrative by her Sarracen identity, yet her role as healer within the forest complicates her femininity and her correlation with other female Sarracen figures in French medieval literature. Gilbert defines the role of the Sarracen female persona as more active than that of the Christian woman. The "Belles Sarrasines" are "sexually forward, clever and crafty, crossdressers and betrayers of husbands or fathers" (222). The second type of feminine persona, the Christian woman, is defined as "passive and inactive, an inspiration but not a mover, essentially secondary to men, whether fathers or husbands" (222). Nicolette does,
indeed, go from the love-object whose ankle brings miraculous healing to loving-subject who actively plans an escape for her and her lover. Yet, she embodies more than these two personae. She also puts into question all discourses on women and how these discourses construct the different female characters of romance.

In the *topos* of the forest as a return to a state of nature, Nicolette is stripped of belonging to any society, and does not participate in any exchange in the Lévi-Straussian sense of the word. She constructs a hut, and the elements used to build the dwelling link this third healing scene to the two references to healing mentioned above. The ‘flor de lis’ is not one of these elements. Aucassin's poem begins and ends with "flor de lis" (11.12), which refers to Nicolette.68 She literally uses the "flor de lis" (lilies), mentioned in Aucassin’s poem, to construct her hut:

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Ele prist flors de lis
Et de l'erbe du garris
Et de le foille autresi,
Une bele loge en fit:
Ainques tant gente ne vi. (19.12-16)
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A parallelism can be established between this reference to "flors de lis" and the reference found in Aucassin's poem (11.12), since both sections are written in verse. Both sections also begin with the mention of the flower. Just as Nicolette had reappropriated Aucassin's reference to her healing attributes, she reappropriates the flower. She mixes one component of herself as initially defined by Aucassin with other types of foliage, "erbe de garris" and "foille autresi," in order to build her hut.

These same elements go into the process of healing Aucassin's shoulder. The first reference to healing made by Aucassin in his poem then links to the healing episode in the forest. The hut's building block then links to the episode within itself through the

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68 Medieval troubadour poets used of nicknames (*sehals*) for their *domnas* in order to hide their identities.
references to "erbe" and "foille". Indeed, when Nicolette puts Aucassin's shoulder back into place, she reverts to the use of "erbe fresce" and "fuelles verdes" in order to speed up his recovery. The fleur-de-lis gains a different meaning during Nicolette's active role-playing. The flower helps to show the fact that for her language can be a means to an end, a mediator for the translation of her desire. Hence, the mention of herbs also reveals the communicative function of language.

Current studies on the role of the medieval female healing or medical practitioners are influenced by methods used to study male medical and healing practitioners and thereby conclude that there is a lack of recognition for women's professionalism.\(^6^9\) The male healing practitioner was often referred to as a "mire," but women were not endowed with a title that helps categorize their practice and knowledge of medicine.\(^7^0\)

Peggy McCracken claims that a study of the representation of women healers in Old French literature proves to be difficult because the boundary between magic and medicine has long been deliberately blurred so as to undermine women's professionalization and to belittle their actual knowledge of the art and science of healing: "In the literary text the sphere and influence of women's medical practice is restricted or hidden by its association with magic: the work of women healers in medieval romance is usually credited to a use of the supernatural" (McCracken 241). The modern distinction between science and magic cannot apply to the Middle Ages, and a claim to the clear distinction between the two at this time would be anachronistic. Yet, the fact remains that men were attributed a medical title more often than women. According to McCracken, because women were not recognized as actual practitioners of an officially

\(^{6^9}\) By Monica Green, William Minkowski, and Peggy McCracken.

\(^{7^0}\) "Throughout much of Europe, the new trend to control the practice of medicine largely resulted in the constriction of women's roles in health care services" (Minkowski 293).
recognized form of healing, they were also often neglected in historical records. Micheline de Combarieu attributes a magical form of power to the "jeune musulmane". Il semble que leur savoir, surtout dans la mesure où il apparaît d'origine magique, confère à ces jeunes filles un charme un peu mystérieux, et parfois inquiétant, qui n'est pas sans attrait" (185). Although mysterious powers are attributed to Nicolette in this episode, her unusually active role shows that there is more at play than just simple attribution. When Nicolette appropriates discourse on healing, she renders evident the power of representation prevalent in language. She renders visible the "magical" component of discourse on healing while she also deconstructs this same discourse. The act of healing helps undo the hunter-hunted dichotomy, and replaces it with a healer-healed dichotomy. Aucassin enters the forest, and recognizes Nicolette's hut:

"E! Dix, fait Aucassins, ci fu Nicolete me douce amie, et ce Fist ele avec ses beles mains. Por le douçour de li et por s'amor me Descendrai je ore ci et m'I reposera." (24.83-86)

He thinks of Nicolette, falls off his horse, and dislocates his shoulder. He then crawls until he reaches the hut. Nicolette hears his laments, finds him in the hut and begins to apply her skills to cure him.

Ele le porstasta et trova qu'il avoit l'espaulle hors de liu. Ele le Mania tant a ses blanches mains et porsaca, si con Dix le vaut que les Amans ainme, qu'ele revint a liu. Et puis si prist des flors et de l'erbe Fresce et des fuelles verdes; si le loia sus au pan de sa cemisse, et il fu Tox garis. (26.10-15)

The reference made to Nicolette's hands in both instances renders her role more active as healer; she actively performs surgery. Aucassin had claimed that women love with their "oeuil", with their "mamele" and with their "orteil" (14.22-25). In this scene, however,
emphasis is rather placed on the active practice of medicine thanks to her hands, rather than the passive, bodily way for women to love and be loved. In addition to disturbing the traditional passive-active binary associated with women and men respectively, a discrepancy now arises between the biological nature of women and their culturally constructed gender role. Nicolette uses the “flors de lis,” a symbol of herself as an objectified woman sexualized through Aucassin and the pilgrim’s gaze at her limb. She gives new meaning to the metaphor when she reappropirates it and uses it to build her own hut in the forest. Using her hands to practice surgery, she redefines her own body parts and, by extension, her own identity.

The reference to Nicolette's hands also fits her practice of healing within the process of the professionalization of medicine within the Middle Ages. Medicine was largely practiced by three groups of professionals: doctors, surgeons and barbers.

L'exercice de l'art de guérir était réparti au Moyen Âge, principalement entre les trois groupes professionnels de médecins, des chirurgiens, des barbiers, entre lesquels comme on le sait, existèrent des rivalités légendaires…Et en dehors des corps principaux, d'autres praticiens pouvaient apporter des soins, comme les inciseurs, les triacleurs, les sages-femmes et tous les opérateurs ambulants; moins bien connus, mais sans doute en grand nombre, les empiriques et les charlatans constituaient des concurrents que les représentants de la médecine officielle poursuivaient avec acharnement. (Jacquart 27-28)

The rivalry mentioned by Danielle Jacquart became well marked during the thirteenth century, the time at which some scholars have approximated the composition of Aucassin et Nicolette. The division between doctors and surgeons became more explicit in the thirteenth century.

Les réglementations médiévales tendirent à séparer nettement l'art du médecin des métiers manuels. L'interdiction pour les clercs munis des ordres majeurs d'exercer la chirurgie s'étendit à l'ensemble
Surgeons and university doctors practiced medicine in a different fashion because doctors could not use their hands while surgeons were given the right to do so. Nicolette's work can then be categorized in this way, since she is a woman and thus a body in comparison to Aucassin who is soul and spirit; she can use her hands to heal Aucassin since such an act does not in any way restrict her to male categories of femininity. Yet, her practice of healing does render her more akin to the surgeons of the time. Does her method for healing her lover's shoulder conform to methods used by contemporary surgeons or described in medieval texts of the time? A century later, the fourteenth-century surgeon Guy de Chauliac writes on methods to heal a dislocated shoulder. Guy de Chauliac claims to be borrowing his methods from medical texts written by Muslim physicians Avicenna and Albucasis. Chauliac describes what is meant by "fracture" (or dislocation).

La defloüeure ou desnoüeure (comme dissent Avicenna et Albucasis) est l'issuë de l'os et de son lieu naturel, auquel il est conjoint. (Chauliac 370)

The author enumerates three different methods for putting the shoulder back in place. The first of these methods is similar to the way Nicolette puts Aucassin's shoulder back in place.

La première convient aux legeres: et c'est, que l'on estende le bras, et que tu mettes le poing, ou les doigts, ou ton espaule, sous l'aisselle: puis en tyrant, le bras soit abaissé, et tiré en bas, et par ce moyen se remettra. (Chauliac 376)

Nicolette also uses her hands to heal Aucassin's shoulder. If her use of herbs place her in the category of healers mentioned by Combarieu (185) and Peggy McCracken (248-249),
her practice of surgical methods described by Guy de Chauliac render more difficult her
categorization as a healer and as a woman. 73 Though women did perform surgery in the
Middle Ages, books on the topic were mostly written by men. The typical Old French
representation of the woman healer is not that of the female surgeon, but that of the
persona at the threshold between a herbalist and a magical healer.

When Nicolette constructs her hut, she uses her hands as well as "flors de lis," "erbe," and "fuelle." During the healing scene, her hands, herbs and foliage play an important role as well. Muriel Hughes argues that women's knowledge of herbal medicine went hand in hand with their knowledge of cooking, and the author categorizes women healers within the domestic realm (Hughes 43). In fact, Hughes argues that the housekeeping book written by the Menagier de Paris for his wife contains relatively few references to the healing benefits of herbs because the author, being male, could not have had this knowledge. If Nicolette's knowledge of herbs helps fit her within a typically feminine space, her reappropriation of methods for healing a dislocated shoulder prevents us from claiming that her knowledge stems only from her belonging to a feminine, domestic space. The parallelism between methods of curing a dislocated shoulder found both in Chauliac's text and in Nicolette's practice allow us to wonder whether she stands at the crossroads between masculine and feminine domains in terms of the way in which healing practices are represented in medieval texts.

More importantly, the healing scene brings about an obvious reversal of roles between Aucassin and Nicolette. Though the poet emphasizes God's involvement in her process of healing her lover, it is actually Nicolette's hands that bring about this healing.

73 Could it be possible that the poet was aware of Avicenna and Albucasis' influence in the field of surgery? And does this knowledge fit into Nicolette's representation as a Sarracen? If so, one can perceive the poet going beyond the stereotypical portrayal of the "Belle Sarrasine" or "jeune musulmane."
She is the active contributor of a certain form of knowledge through its practice.

Nicolette puts into question the way her relationship with Aucassin is conceived according to other discourses on heterosexual relationships. The reader expects to find a hunter-hunted dichotomy once Aucassin ventures into the forest, but, instead, finds Aucassin falling off his horse, breaking his shoulder, and crawling until his beloved’s hut. It is for this same reason that the episode in the forest has been classified as parodic by many critics. And it is through parody that the cultural fitting of sex with gender can be deconstructed. Parody helps put into question the way differences between men and women are usually determined. When, through the example of the beast, Nicolette makes the reference to women as miraculous or magical beings with curing attributes she parodies this same discourse on women. As a result, she exposes the paradox of cultural constructions of her gendered identity. She also ridicules Aucassin's discourse by parodying the hunted-hunted role-play. The reader instead finds a healer-healed or healer-wounded binary in which Aucassin is clearly passive and Nicolette active.

Aucassin's shoulder is first "hors de liu," then, thanks to Nicolette it "revint à liu." This double reference to "liu," or place, foreshadows Aucassin and Nicolette's return to their initial locus, Beaucaire, after the knots have been undone, and the broken pieces put back into place. It is no coincidence that Aucassin's shoulder has been displaced, since Nicolette's active role in putting it back in place correlates with the need for her to return to Cartagena and a changed Beaucaire.

After Nicolette's healing practice in the forest, the Torelore episode can be expected, since it allows us to imagine briefly a reversal of gender responsibilities. Each

74 “Gender parody becomes a critical tool, a way of initiating change in sex and gender roles.” (Robertson 10).
episode that contains a reference to healing represents a step toward the gradual questioning of the two protagonists' roles and identities. The healing scene in the forest then generates a chain of events following it that expose how Nicolette, by her mere presence, forces the author to question the discourses he has used to represent her. The carnavalesque world of Torelore generates an opportunity to temporarily accept an extreme reversal of roles between the king and the queen of the town. Aucassin's anger toward the king can be explained by his unwillingness to undo with the patriarchal order imposed by his father in Beaucaire. For this reason, the inhabitants of Torelore do not want Aucassin to remain in their city. Nicolette, on the other hand, has less difficulty adapting to the order she finds in this town, and she quickly accepts the role reversal between the king and his wife. Yet, Nicolette as a persona also puts into question the mere reversal of roles within a heterosexual relationship. Standing at the threshold between the domains of the masculine and the feminine, once again, Nicolette puts into question the correlation between sex and gender.

Nicolette the “Jongleur”

At the end of the narrative, Nicolette returns from Cartagena to Beaucaire dressed as a jongleur. This episode follows the numerous steps that mark the couple's evolving roles within their relationship and it generates a more drastic transformation of the social order within Beaucaire and within the economy of the narrative. This final story also neatly sums up the couple's adventures. The episode is pertinent for the issue of gender reversal because Nicolette sings at Aucassin's court, and it is framed by the process of her putting on and removing the disguise of a jongleur.
Before arriving in Beaucaire, Nicolette revisits her native land and discovers she is the daughter of the king of Cartagena. While staying in Torelore, the couple is indeed abducted by pirates who place them in separate ships. Nicolette arrives in Cartagena and during her stay, learns to play the "vielle." When her father chooses a husband for her, she decides it is time to flee and return to Aucassin’s city. Before crossing the sea, Nicolette stays overnight at an old woman's house who disguises her as a male jongleur.

This final section of the narrative, from the couple’s abduction, until the end, contains indirect references to healing. Nicolette uses herbs to paint her face, and she uses "éclaire", or greater celandine, a specific type of herb, to remove her jongleur mask.75 The use of herbs in this episode connects it to the healing scene in the forest. It becomes evident here that the heroine's knowledge of herbs goes beyond medical and healing purposes. Whereas the actual practice of healing helps blur such a clear distinction, extending her use of herbs to the process of disguising her true identity can be interpreted as associating her with images of women as mysterious and devious. Examples of knowledgeable, but devious women can be found in numerous fabliaux. Peggy McCracken argues that medieval authors render mysterious and suspicious women's knowledge of the art and science of healing. Such an argument can better explain why Nicolette's knowledge of herbs extends beyond their healing attributes. Unlike male healing practitioners who, in literature, solely act as doctors or surgeons, Nicolette’s role extends beyond her medical practice and she is devoid of any professional affiliation: her knowledge provides her the power not only to heal, but to disguise herself, thus to fool

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75 Interestingly, reference to the greater celandine can be found in the Salernitan author Trotula’s De Ornatu Mulierum (On women’s Cosmetics), also known as Trotula Minor. According to the author, greater celandine can be used for lightening one’s hair or for dying one’s hair blond: “Take the root of greater celandine and madder, grind each and with oil in which cumin and boxwood shavings and greater celandine and a little bit of crocus have been carefully cooked, anoint the head” (Trotula 116).
her lover. The fact that she uses herbs not only to heal, but also to mask herself, can undermine her knowledge of the medicinal attributes of herbs.

Critics who have focused on the role of the female Sarracen in both medieval epic and romance genres argue that this female persona has a more devious side to her. She uses her wit to fool the Saracens and to help the Christians. Micheline de Combarieu uses the example of Nubie in *La Prise de Cordres et de Serbille*:

> Avec l'aide d'un chambellan complaisant, qui partage avec elle, sinon son amour pour un chrétien, du moins un vieux –et curieux --désir d'embrasser le Christianisme, elle endort, grâce à ses connaissances magico-médicales, toute la garnison pour permettre aux chrétiens de s'enfuir. (184)

The critic begins with this example because Nubie encompasses the "Sarrasine" prototype. In other words, she uses magico-medical knowledge for her own benefit, and to assist the Christian army. When Sarracen female figures appear in medieval literature, they generally exemplify the advantages of having magico-medical knowledge since they use this wit for the benefit of the Christian community and culture. Combarieu’s interpretation may explain the use of the term "prous" by the anonymous poet to describe Nicolette. When Nicolette disguises herself as *jongleur* and appears at Aucassin's court, she retells her own adventures under this new mask. She then changes Aucassin’s expression "Nicolette, douce amie" to "Nicolette la prous":

"Escoutés moi, franc baron
Cil d'aval et cil d'amont:
Plairoit vos oïr un son
d'Aucassin, un franc baron,
de Nicholete la prous?
Tant durerent lor amors
Qu'il quist u gaut parfont.

A Torelore u dongeon
Les prissent paiien en jor.
D'Aucassin rien ne savons,
Mais Nicholete la prous
Est a Cartage el donjon,
Car ses ses peres l'ainme mout
Qui sire est de cel roion.
Doner li volent baron
Un roi de paiiens felon.
Nicholete n'en a soing,
Car ele aime un dansellon
Qui Aucassins avoit non;
Bien jure Dieu et son [non].
Ja ne prendera baron,
S'ele n'a son amoer
Que tant desire." (39.14-36)

Disguised as a troubadour, Nicolette once again sets up a situation that encourages Aucassin to chase her. Letting her lover know that he can still hope to marry her, she urges him to take on a more active role. In her poem, Nicolette addresses her audience just as the poet does so in his prologue. Despite parallelisms between the two passages, slight but important variations appear that come to show that Nicolette takes on a more active role at the end of the narrative. Aucassin is described as having prowess in the prologue, while it is to Nicolette that this same characteristic is attributed in her own poem. The term is applied to Nicolette in the end for several reasons. The term "prous" finds its origins in a tradition of female figures who remain faithful to the one they love. One example of such feminine personae is Aude in *La Chanson de Roland*. Sharon Kinoshita examines Bramimonde's position in this epic tale. She notices that the term "preux" is attributed to the Christian woman Aude, Roland's fiancé. After Roland's death, when Charlemagne tries to marry off Aude to Louis, "'Preux' like her fiancé rather than 'sage' like her brother, she drops dead at the emperor's feet" (Kinoshita 100). The term "prous" takes on this same significance in *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Because she flees from
Beaucaire, survives in the forest, and finally flees from Cartagena, Nicolette is qualified as "prous" not only because she is daring but also because she remains faithful to Aucassin.

Nicolette's song is representative of her prowess in yet another sense. As Kevin Brownlee has remarked, the heroine's linguistic skills may explain why the adjective "prous" applies to her by the end. Her prowess goes beyond her ability to play with language. She also uses language as a coded message, both to secretly communicate with her lover and to expose the structure of ideology behind language and speech. Nowhere in the narrative is the correlation between poet and Nicolette more noticeable than in the final episode. The *mise en abyme* allows us to perceive the craftsman behind the craft, and thus to see the author's active involvement in the reconstruction of his tale, and its transference as a coded message. Nicolette first uses language in order to be hunted by Aucassin in the forest, then to let him know that she has returned in order to marry him.

Nicolette's masking and unmasking thanks to herbs frames the scene in which she sings in Aucassin's court. After fleeing from her father's castle in Cartagena, she stays overnight at a poor woman's house and dies her skin by means of a plant extract:

> Si se hebergea cièz une povre fenme sor le ravage; si prist une herbe, si en oint son cief et son visage, si qu'ele fu tote noire et tainte. (38.16-19)

Similarly, a special plant, celandine, restores her lightness of skin she seeks the help of her adoptive mother:

> Ele se hebergea la, si parla tant qu'ele li gehi son afaire et que le vicontesse le reconunut et seut bien aue c'estoit Nicolete et qu'ele l'avoit norrie; si le fist laver et baignier et sejorner uit jor tous plains. Si prist une herbe aui avoit non esclaire, si s'en oint, si fu ausi bele qu'ele avoit onques esté a nul jor. (40.32-39)

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76 Eugene Vance also states that “the author’s primary goal in *Aucassin et Nicolette* was not merely a comedy of love, but a comedy of language” (Vance 39).
In both episodes, a bond is created between Nicolette and the other women. After a long period of time during which female figures are absent from Nicolette's life, she suddenly begins to seek and find women's help. It would be anachronistic to perceive a complete reversal of roles through these episodes. Both episodes do put into question, however, the Lévi-Straussian structure of alliance where men function as active subjects exchanging women as objects, or commodities, between kinship groups. Although Aucassin's parents have both died, Nicolette's adoptive father has died while her adoptive mother (now mentioned for the first time) is clearly still living. Contrary to what we find at the onset of the narrative, in the end, the male and paternal figures grow scarce whereas female and maternal figures grow plentiful. The patriarchal order symbolized by Aucassin's father is rejected and a new form of exchange is set into place.

Bonds thus grow in the end between female figures: the two other women's mediating roles as helpful hostesses change the structure of exchange prescribed by Lévi-Strauss and critiqued by modern gender theorists such as Eve Sedgwick, Luce Irigaray, and Gale Rubin. Karen Newman's conceptualization of the possibility of women being subjects of exchange, or otherwise subjects contributing to the process of exchange within society, sheds light on Nicolette's role in the final episodes and her

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77 "Based on readings and critiques of Lévi-Strauss and Engels, in addition to Freud and Lacan, Gayle Rubin has argued in an influential essay that patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of the traffic of women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (Sedgwick 26).
78 "La loi qui ordonne notre société, c'est la valorisation exclusive des besoins-désirs des hommes, et des échanges entre eux. Ce que l'anthropologue désigne comme le passage de la nature à la culture revient donc à l'instauration de l'empire de l'hom(m)osexualité" (Irigaray 168).
79 Gayle Rubin's analysis is based on two works by Lévi-Strauss. She analyzes *Elementary Structures of Kinship (Structure Élémentaires de la parenté)* as well as an article entitle "The Family" ("La Famille"). "It is of interest to carry this kind of deductive enterprise even further than Lévi-Strauss does, and to explicate the logical structure which underlies his entire analysis of kinship. At the most general level, the social organization of sex rests on upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality" (Rubin 121).
interaction with other female figures. The women who generate the possibility of imagining other forms of alliance serve to render available an instance in which Nicolette can become the subject who controls the exchange. The healing scenes, the use of herbs, and the presence of other female figures constitute elements enabling Nicolette to actively build an alliance with her beloved Aucassin, and thus to become both subject and object of exchange.

Nicolette’s poem shows that she is taking on a more active role (39.14-36). As in the episode of the healing beast, a masculine persona is necessary to mediate communication. The shepherd changes Nicolette's message in the first instance whereas Nicolette's own jongleur disguise now functions as that filter. The shepherd’s intervention may show that women’s messages need to be first transformed and then conveyed by a male figure. As a result, this process of mediation reduces the value of feminine speech. Yet, when Nicolette’s takes on a masculine role, she parodies masculine discourse on women and such a process disturbs the status quo, denouncing the conventionality that discourses on women generate. Finally, Nicolette's poem tells of her active choice to marry Aucassin. Herbs and healing temporarily provide her a locus in which she can act as a subject and actively participate in the process of exchange. She is able to gain agency thanks to the clever use of her hands, through the application of her knowledge of herbs, and through her practice of surgery. This participation is also made possible because Nicolette actually states in her poem that she has chosen not to marry a Saracen king in order to marry Aucassin. Her alliance with other female figures reinforces her changing role toward the end of the narrative. It is no wonder that the poet concludes:
Once the couple has reunited, the poet no longer speaks. The healing effect upon the public is no longer brought about by their gaze on Nicolette's body. By the end, it is Nicolette's union with Aucassin that explains the author's epilogue. On the one hand we have a "happy ending" in the traditional format, and a tale of love leading to marriage. On the other hand, Nicolette's desire to participate actively in the union through marriage undercuts the oppressive side of marriage for women. Aucassin's father's control in the beginning of the tale would have forced Nicolette to remain a slave, a "caitive" to her feminine condition. The first healing scene helps expose homosocial bonds she generates between men, and the passive role provided her through Aucassin's evocation of the miraculous effects of her naked limb. The healing scene in the forest, and the reference to healing that precedes it deconstruct Aucassin's discourse on women. Her use of her hands to construct the hut and to perform surgery on Aucassin generates a role reversal that further destabilizes the order that regulates gender roles. The healing scenes provide the possibility to consider a different, more active, role for Nicolette as much as they prompt a *remise en question* of the construction of gender roles in Old French texts.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Healer Blurring Gender Role Boundaries in Rutebeuf's Dit de l’Herberie and in the Anonymous Fabliau La Seineresse

"Woman is conceived as a perpetually overdetermined signifier with respect to which man is always at risk." –R. Howard Bloch

A father and his son, on a journey out of town, have a car accident. The father dies immediately but his son survives and is taken to the nearest hospital where the doctor, seeing the boy, says with surprise, “this is my son!” Who is the doctor? The answer to the riddle is that the doctor is the boy’s mother. This brainteaser relies on the common assumption that the title “doctor.” The current chapter examines the problems that arise when women play the role of medical practitioner in one dit and one fabliau. When the title of doctor is attributed to female healing practitioners, disturbance appears in traditional ways of conceptualizing gender. The thirteenth-century author Rutebeuf’s Dit de l’Herberie as well as the anonymous fabliau La Seineresse contain examples of female medical practitioners who render possible both a critique of women's nature and a questioning of gender differences. The narrator in Rutebeuf's poem is a herb merchant from Champagne whose goal is to attract customers. He claims to have gained his knowledge of herbs and healing practice from a female medical professor, Trotula. The fabliau La Seineresse is about a bourgeois couple's conjugal rivalry. The husband claims that no woman can fool him, but his wife overhears this and devises a plan to prove him wrong. Soon, a female bloodletter arrives at the house, who, as we soon discover, is
actually a man dressed as a woman. The bourgeois wife's ruse is to have intercourse with the bloodletter right under the husband's roof.

Both texts intend to be humorous, though the fabliau more so than the *Dit*. Parody generates a parallelism between the two stories, since they parody an aspect of the medical field. Rutebeuf mocks the rhetoric of a merchant trying to sell herbs and potions, while the author of the fabliau ridicules the claims of professionalism by blood letters. These narratives also simultaneously construct and deconstruct the male-female binary. From an initial reading, the audience can deduce in both cases that women are mischievous, devious, and even dangerous, but the narrators are ambiguous when depicting women. The healer's role and authority further complicate the initial reading and lead to a questioning of whether the authors simply reiterate or challenge discourses on the male-female binary.

**The Herb Merchant, and Long-Eared Trotula**

Rutebeuf’s *Dit de l’Herberie* was composed late in the thirteenth century. The narrator, a merchant pretending to possess knowledge of herbs and medicine, tries to attract attention at a fair in order to sell his knowledge of medicine, his medicinal potions and stones. Rutebeuf’s other pieces deal with political matters of his epoch, with religious themes, and his tone remains satirical in most works. The *Dit de l’Herberie* stands out among his works; critics prefer to place it in the same category as his *fabliaux*.

The various collections of Rutebeuf’s works tend to contain, or include a reference to, three anonymous works that either resemble the *Dit de l’Herberie* or that appear to have influenced it: *La Goûte en l’Aîne*, *Le Dit d’un Mercier*, and *Le Dit de l’Herberie en Prose*. These other works also deal with the theme of the quack merchant
or doctor, and they stand as proof that there existed a genre of satire told in the first
person by such a persona. Rutebeuf’s poem is of particular interest because he makes
reference to the famous Salernitan physician and writer Trotula. The current chapter will
examine the representation of this female figure in Rutebeuf’s *Dit*. Her presence in the
poem proves important, despite the author’s anti-feminist representation of women.

Comparing Rutebeuf’s *Dit de l’Herberie* with a contemporary anonymous prose
*Dit de l’Herberie* sheds more light on the way the poet represents women in his work.
Jubinal's edition of Rutebeuf's *Oeuvres Complètes* includes an anonymous *Herberie en
Prose* and another work entitled *La Goûte en l’Aîne*. This thirteenth-century prose
version is longer than Rutebeuf's poem; it is written in the first person and is a parodic
text about a doctor who boasts of his talent, experience, and knowledge in order to
market himself. *La Goûte en l’Aîne* reproduces the voice of a university doctor who, once
again, boasts of his knowledge in order to attract patients. A third text, *Le Dit d'un
Mercier*, is mentioned as well by editors of Rutebeuf's works, though Jubinal does not
include this last poem. In his annotated version of Rutebeuf's *Oeuvres Complètes*, Michel
Zink mentions this third poem as yet another work that compares to the *Dit de l'Herberie*
(765). It is written in the first person and it parodies the discourse of merchants in
general. The prose *Herberie* resembles Rutebeuf's verse version in large part. This prose
version, written in the first person, displays the rhetoric of a merchant-doctor selling his
knowledge of medicine and his medicinal stones, and various sorts of concoctions. Some
sections of the text are nearly identical in content to what can be found in Rutebeuf’s
poem. For example, both texts refer to a list of countries visited by the narrator, as well as
to a list of currencies used in different regions of France and England. Unlike Rutebeuf's
verse version, however, the prose *Herberie* contains a dialogue within it that renders it more comical. In its opening section, the prose *Herberie* makes reference to women in order to show to what extent they lie or tell non-truths. Rutebeuf's *Dit*, however, does not contain this type of mockery of women. Finally, the two texts diverge with respect to their purported source. Both narrators claim to have gained medical knowledge from a certain "maître" or teacher, yet this teacher is a male doctor in the prose version, whereas in Rutebeuf's version the "maîtresse" is Trotula.

The elements which differentiate the two texts allow us to better understand Rutebeuf’s narrator’s perspective on women. The prose *Herberie* begins with an examination of women’s language, as the author lists instances in which men can rely on women’s words.

La première chose si est tele que si la met .i. for tot chaut comme por pain cuire, et il li viègne au-devant et il demant: "Bele suer, coment vos est-il?" S'ele dit: "Sir, ge n'ai pas froit;" certes il l'en doit bien croire. L'autre anprès si est tele que s'il la met en .i. sac et li loie bien la bouche, et il la gite desor le pont en l'aive, et il li viegne au-devant et il li demande: "Bele suer, comment vos est-il?" S'ele li dit: "Certes, sire, ge n'ai pas soif;" il l'en bien doit croire. La tierce après est tele que se ele travaille d'enfant, et il li viègne au-devant, et il li demant: "Bele suer, coment vos est-il?" Se el li dit: "Certes, sire, ge sui malades;" il l'en doit bien croire, que si est-ele.—La quarte après si est tele que si li preudons vient devant sa preude feme, et il li demande:"Dame, que feroiz-vos?" Et se ele li respond: "Sire, je vos corrocerai." Il l'en doit bien croire, que si fera-ele, se ele puet. (468)

The beginning section of the text shows, because it presents a mockery of women in medical jargon, is intended for a male audience. The narrator lists instances in which a husband can be sure that his wife is not lying. According to Hippocratic logic, disease results from a lack of balance between different elements within the body or between the body and the outside world. The text’s logic compares to this type of language, since the
woman uttering truths only speaks when she loses equilibrium. This medical logic is used to show when women can be trusted.

Echoing other misogynistic discourses that exist mainly in thirteenth-century *fabliaux* and romances, the text ultimately shows that women rarely tell the truth and that they are not to be trusted. The narrator of this prose version also attributes to women the sole function of objects to be examined or problems to be decoded by men, as they are excluded from the medical field, and they are compared to a disease the cure for which is prescribed by the narrator.

Rutebeuf satirizes women’s nature by a different method. He shifts the blame for men’s devious nature onto women through the figure of Trotula, functioning as an allegorical figure. In “Mask and Allegorical Personification”, Daniel Poirion and Caroline Weber examine the role of allegory in thirteenth-century literature. The authors claim that, “allegorical personification works to designate political figures, real people, actors in history. It gives those people a mask—first as a precaution, no doubt, allowing for criticism that is both personal and anonymous; next as an insult, applying infamous labels and attributing a fundamental vice to each one” (22). Trotula can be considered an allegorical figure. She is a historical persona and she enables the poet to take a short cut in order to establish links between her and women, especially those practicing medicine. She may a way through which the makes reference to the changing medical milieu of his time, and to the status of women doctors in relation to the expansion of the Paris medical school. Did Rutebeuf have an intention to mock all charlatan doctors, and especially those who are female practitioners of healing?
I can better argue here that in Rutebeuf’s case, Trotula represents the vice of deceptive rhetoric. The merchant-narrator uses rhetoric to sell to his audience ideal potions and other medicinal objects. Yet, in order to rid himself of the responsibility of being named a quack, he states that Trotula has been his instructor. Andrew Cowell claims first that the poet’s contemporaries mostly speak of “avarice” and argues that Rutebeuf’s Dit indirectly mocks religious rhetoric which the critic compares to modern-day rhetoric for commodity advertising:

Certainly large parts of medieval vernacular literature (courtly romance, fabliaux, lyric poetry) have at various times and by various critics been seen as implicitly or explicitly resisting ecclesiastical modes of thought, and the rhetorical discourse of courtly love can certainly be read in opposition to that of the church (see Glendinning 1992 and more broadly Leupin 1989). However, a second counterrhetoric is of interest here, that of the profit economy. It has been widely noted that the dominant vice of the thirteenth century in moral texts is that of avarice. The emblem of avarice is typically the bourgeois and specifically the merchant. The discourse of the merchant, in other words, commodity advertising becomes the emblem of the counterrhetoric of avarice and more generally of the desire for worldly pleasures and indulgences” (804)

Rutebeuf’s text also falls within the category of “the discourse of the merchant” and it counters religious rhetoric from such a perspective. Rutebeuf being himself religious, however, it seems as though he argues from a religious perspective that women are devious. Both prose and verse texts also mock, however, the type of charlatan doctor who is really a merchant and not a scientist. By “counterrhetoric” literature Cowell means literature that counters religious rhetorical texts and also satirizes bourgeois discourse. Both Rutebeuf’s text and the anonymous prose Herberie humour women’s nature because they are influenced by anti-feminist religious discourse, while each text produces this mockery in a particular way.
The verse *Dit de l’Herberie*, told in the first person by a herb merchant from Champagne, is about the merchant putting on a medicine show and attracting clients while boasting of the magico-medicinal powers of his herbs, stones, and concoctions. Rutebeuf writes a satirical work akin to the *fabliaux*, and his herb merchant uses the widely-known Trotula both to give validity to his own words and, paradoxically, to reiterate misogynistic discourse. In a way, Rutebeuf’s narrator generates a stronger mockery of women because he acquires his knowledge, rhetorical skills, and ruse from a woman.

The poem contains a long verse section and it ends with a shorter prose section. In this second section, the author reveals the source of his medical knowledge.

Bele gent, je ne sui pas de ces povres prescheurs, ne de ces povres herbiers qui vont par devant ces mostiers a ces povres chapes maucozues, qui portent boites et sachez, et si estendent un tapiz: car teiz vent poivre et coumin qui n’a pas autant de sachez com li ont. Sachiez que de ceulz ne suis-je pas, ainz suis a une dame qui a non ma dame Trote de Salerne, qui fait cuevreché de ces oreilles, et li sorciz li pendent a chaînnes d’argent par desus les espaulles. Et sachiez que c'est la plus sage dame qui soit enz quatre parties dou monde.

Daniel Poirion and Caroline Weber analyze the use of allegory by thirteenth-century authors and argue that fictional characters used as allegorical figures work, within fiction, to reveal a political truth. Authors hide their critique of the church or the king under allegory (21). For example, Poirion and Weber show that Rutebeuf uses the figure of “Renard le Bestourné” to criticize the king. In the *Dit de l’Herberie*, Trotula can be seen to play a similar role as “Renart.” Nancy Freeman Regalado says that “the medieval poet-portraitist felt […] that individual peculiarities were a hindrance to their desire to portray exemplary types” (61). The personality-type character better enables the poet to express his own opinion on women, on medicine, and on women’s relation to the field of
medicine. The figure of Trotula also has this second function of being a doctor-type who helps the author generate doubt and skepticism about women practitioners of medicine. Both prose and verse *Herberie* mock false doctors while belittling women. Trotula allows Rutebeuf to add simultaneously these two elements to his work. If she functions as an allegorical figure, she may allow the author to reveal a historical truth about doctors. At the same time, he may also be reiterating anti-feminist discourse.

Andrew Cowell argues that Rutebeuf’s work fits within the category of counterrhetorical texts that satirized religious literature. One can wonder whether by representing the merchant as mischievous the author make indirect reference to the story of Adam and Eve: man’s ill nature is a result of Eve having been tempted and, if the merchant is a sinner, his sin is a result of Trotula’s teachings. Rutebeuf, like the anonymous author of the prose *Herberie*, insinuates that women’s knowledge is worthless.

Speaking in the first person and addressing his clients, the quack merchant argues he is better than other merchants and doctors who falsely promise cure with their products. Rutebeuf's verse version presents a more historically contextualized attack on quack doctors and herbalists. The author is well known for being among the first poets to use the context of his epoch within his poetry. Jean Dufournet states that Rutebeuf's work, "comporte cinq grands massifs. Deux premiers groupes se détachent, dix-huit pièces de longueur variable, relatives à l'Église, aux ordres mendiant et à l'Université, et douze, qui prêchent la croisade" (25). Dufournet does not put the poet's *Herberie* in any of the mentioned categories. Rather, he classifies this work with the poet's "pieces à rire composées pour un public désireux de se distraire" (26). Taking into consideration the
changes undergone by the medical field in the thirteenth century, especially in Paris, may lead one to read Rutebeuf's poem as being more in tune with its contemporary epoch than with the author's other comical works. The Parisian medical school dates to the thirteenth century, when doctors were given permission to teach. Danielle Jacquart states that in April of 1231, "l'autorisation d'enseigner à nouveau à Paris, après l'exode à Angers et à Orléans, est accordée aux artium et physicae facultatis magistris" (19). This event generated the beginning of the centralization of medical knowledge at the university, and it rendered more explicit the distinction between university doctors and the "empiriques ignorants (‘des femmes,’ ‘des moines,’ ‘des hommes grossiers’)" (Jacquart 18). The laws restricting the practice of medicine gradually became stricter as a result of the important role of the university. Rutebeuf's work contains two types of healers that fall in the category of "empiriques ignorants" mentioned by Danielle Jacquart. On the one hand, the text undermines the art of the herb merchant, and on the other, it casts doubt upon the practice of medicine by women through the figure of Trotula.

"Dame Trote de Salerne" refers to the Salernitan author Trotula. She is known for Passionibus Mulierum Curandorum (The Diseases of Women), a work also known as Trotula Major. By thoroughly examining the eleventh-century author's medical text, Monica Green has begun to cast doubt upon the existence of such a female author. She demonstrates that the three sections of the collection were not written by the same author. Regardless of these facts, we can state here that Rutebeuf must have been fully aware of Trotula's fame. Medieval medical authors refer to Trotula as “magistra mulierum sapiens” or "maîtresse" (professor) of the field of gynecology, and by extension, in the field of medicine. By referring to Trotula, Rutebeuf places his work within the context of
his epoch and simultaneously creates an "effet de réel," as Roland Barthes calls it. Trying to establish credibility in his audience, the merchant-herbalist claims to have knowledge in medicine thanks to Trotula. Because of this added element, the verse *Herberie* provides more authority to women.

It may be argued that Rutebeuf is for women practicing, though this interpretation would not take into consideration the complexity of the poet's message. The contemporary events and issues related to the Parisian university may have more of an influence on the reasons for which he mentions Trotula. The centralization of medical knowledge affected healing practitioners such as women and alternative healers who could not attend medical school. The quack-merchant and Trotula both fall into categories of practitioners that gradually lost the right to heal. The author's description of Trotula in the above-mentioned passage can show that he intends to mock the "maîtresse" as much as he refers to her knowledge and authority to validate the merchant's authority. Trotula, with her long ears and the chains extending from her eyebrows, loses her feminine attributes despite the narrator's choice of calling her "sage femme." The silver chains hanging from her eyebrows may be due to her exotic origin. The merchant mentions having traveled to far-away regions, and this exoticism may inflect his description of Trotula.

Regardless of the reasons for which the author has deprived Trotula of normative feminine attributes, the fact remains that this figure destabilizes the man-woman and mind-body binarisms prevalent in medieval discourse. The text reveals a paradoxical logic which it fails to resolve. The poet-narrator is aware of putting on a medicine show; the text destroys its own credibility through hyperboles and by logically articulating
explanations that would normally seem senseless. Considering the narrator’s role as a salesman and one who simultaneously mocks his own rhetoric shows that Trotula's description fits with the parodic tone of the poem, and it further reinforces the comic effet of the text. In this sense, Rutebeuf follows his contemporary writer of the prose Herberie, as he implies that Trotula taught the merchant how to manipulate his audience and to trick them into buying his products. The merchant's reference to Trotula reinforces the belief that women are manipulative and not trustworthy. Through Trotula, Rutebeuf plays with the themes of "woman" and "femininity." In another passage contained in the prose section of the poem, the poet refers to the herb "armoise" (mugwort or artemisia) used to heal worm disease or "la maladie des vers."

Por la maladie des vers garir—a vos iex la veeiz, a vos la marchiez—la Meilleur herb qui soit elz quatre parties dou monde ce est l'ermoize. Ces fames c'en ceignent le soir de la saint Jehan et en font chapeaux seur leur chiez, et dient que goute ne avertinez ne les puet panre n'en chief, n'en braz, n'en pié, n'en main. Mais je me merveil quand les testes ne lor brisent et que li cors ne rompent par mi, tant a l'erbe de virtu en soi. En cele Champeigne ou je fui neiz, l'apele hon marrebroc, qui vaut autant com "la meire des herbes." (777)

Michel Zink, in his edition of Rutebeuf’s works, notes that the term "armoise" also appears in Trotula's collection.

Le traité de Trotula mentionne l'armoise. D'autres ouvrages du temps en font grand cas, en particulier comme remède pour les femmes. Elle est appelée parfois "herbes de Saint Jean" et certaines traditions populaires invitent à la cueillir la nuit de Saint-Jean et à la porter en ceinture ou en chapelet. Son étymologie même l'associe à la féminité, puisque armoise vient d'artemisia, "herbe d'Artémis." (777)

The poem divides into a prose and a verse section. Mentions of women occur only within the prose part of the poem, and this section can be read representing a sort of “feminine space.” Mention of Trotula generates the transition from verse to prose and, further on, mention of women further “feminizes” the prose section. Zink’s remark reinforces the
possibility of reading the second part of the poem as representing women’s locus. Like
the anonymous writer of the prose Herberie, Rutebeuf also mentions women and their
relation to medicine. Unlike the anonymous writer, however, Rutebeuf further reduces
women to their sexual/reproductive organs. The herb "armoise" is mentioned in the
Trotula Major, and it may serve the purpose of bringing to the forefront the fact that the
compilation deals with gynecology and obstetrics. As Michel Zink states that "armoise"
refers to "la féminité," the author's intention may be to reduce female characters to the
category of "woman" that is defined by the close association between sex and gender.

Rutebeuf's poem generates a series of clear binary associations. First, the narrator
marks the difference between those herbalists and doctors that can be trusted, and those
who are to be avoided. The herb merchant and Trotula are set up in opposition and their
relationship is hierarchically constructed by the student-teacher binary. The herb
merchant, most probably addressing a male audience, appears submissive and ignorant in
front of the magistra in the art of manipulating, of facts and concocting potions. The poet
also refers to religious and medical discourses on gynecology that tend to reduce women
to their reproductive and sexual functions.

The male-female binary parallels the prose-verse binary within the poem. Indeed,
the text generates a dichotomy between prose and verse writing. By the thirteenth
century, literature in prose becomes more prevalent. Proponents of this style gradually
propose that texts written in prose prove to be more authentic and writing in verse
gradually gains a more ornamental function. Rutebeuf’s poem contains a mise en abyme
connected to the question of the distinction between the two styles. In the section written
in prose, the narrator refers to worm disease, or "la maladie des vers" and leads the reader
to wonder whether he is not playing on the double meanings of "verse" and "worm" of the term "vers." This dichotomy between verse and prose further reinforces the belittling and essentialization of women. The merchant describes Trotula as "dame sage," and the term "sage" encompasses both meanings of wise and of "sage femme" or midwife. If prose generates verisimilitude, then through prose writing the narrator further reinforces the representation of Trotula both as beast-like and as mischievous and manipulative. The narrator learns from Trotula the art of rhetoric, of the merchant’s counterrhetoric, and of selling the promise to cure through magic.

A closer examination of Rutebeuf's poem engenders another, more paradoxical, interpretation. Despite the fact that women are criticized and belittled in the text, they play a more pertinent role than in the prose Herberie. Critics have read the poet’s Dit de l’Herberie as an indirect reference to Rutebeuf’s own role as jongleur. The author’s contemporaries even refer to him as the herbalist. If so, could one assume that the author identifies with Trotula? Trotula's medical expertise is not considered knowledge, it is rather a form of false knowledge that serves the sole purpose of marketing the merchant's products. Yet, because the merchant uses Trotula to establish a degree of credibility, and even in a satirical context, he recognizes her as "sage." Furthermore, Trotula is mentioned in the section written in prose, thus where the narrator tries his hardest to establish trust in his reader. Rutebeuf, as a jongleur and ménestrel, was quite aware of the difficulties in attracting a patron or a highly placed audience. Jean Dufournet says of Rutebeuf that he was aware that, "mieux vaut avoir avec soi que contre soi le jongleur qui est très malin, plus habile que la plus habile des femmes" (27). When re-echoing Rutebeuf's ideas on the skills of the medieval poet, Dufournet even mentions the obvious similarity between the
sharpness of women and that of *jongleurs*. The work parodies putting on a show in general, the attempt on the part of merchants to sell products by using ruse, lists composed of names of exotic countries and herbs, as well as the name of well-known personae. Through parody, it thus deconstructs itself continuously. As a result, the initial established binarisms are undone by the comical and satirical tone of the text. In the end, it is not clear how the text comes to construct its own discourse on women. On the one hand, the poet uses Trotula’s established authorship and authority, on the other hand it tries to undermine this same authority.

In *La Pharmacie de Platon*, Jacques Derrida gives center stage to the terms *pharmakon* and *pharmacia*, as he examines their use in Plato's text. The critic points out the flaws in Plato's arguments and his opinion on writing. *Pharmakon*, which Socrates equates with writing, is closely translatable as both poison and cure. The term derives from Plato's mention of a virgin named Pharmacia, whose name signifies the administering of “pharmakon.” Derrida does not focus on the medical aspect of the metaphor used by Plato, yet his play on the Greek word's usage in Plato's writings becomes very pertinent in the study of the relationship between women and medicine in literature. The terms “pharmakon,” “pharmacia,” and the presence of a female figure named Pharmacia generate a circulatory relationship between medicine, poison, the administering of the two elements, writing, and women, verse and prose.

The text, indeed, generates a continuum between medicine, writing, and women. Women’s authority and verse writing are simultaneously put into question by the author. R. Howard Bloch asserts that "it is first of all, around the question of woman that questions of language and of literature are passionately debated between the thirteenth
and the fifteenth centuries" (6). In the same light, Rutebeuf's poem connects the ability for verse and women to tell the truth. In the same fashion that Plato contradicts himself and uses both meanings of cure and poison of “pharmakon” as metaphors for writing, Rutebeuf contradicts himself by using verse for writing and Trotula to create authenticity.

To conclude, in the thirteenth century, authors transition from verse to prose. Rutebeuf plays with this notion and uses prose to speak about Trotula while the herb merchant speaks of himself in verse. Le Dit de l’Herberie makes use of Trotula as an authoritative persona and as a prototypical woman. Having written about women’s gynecology, Trotula as an allegorical figure exemplifies thirteenth-century antifeminist discourse that reproduces the image of women as untrustworthy, untruthful, and as the source of all sin. Trotula’s authority, her fame as a magistra in Salerno, allows the text to tell another story. The author’s paradoxical attitude toward the charlatan merchant generates two contrasting interpretations of the narrator’s use of rhetoric, the second one rendering ambiguous the first one. Trotula and other women are a means through which Rutebeuf attracts a male audience, and thus generate a homosocial bond with his male audience; Trotula also appears to be a threatening figure because she is the “maîtresse,” the source of the merchant’s medical knowledge. Her presence within the poem disturbs normative mind-body and man-woman binaries.

Le ou La "Seineresse"?

The title of the anonymous fabliau La Seineresse has been translated as “La Saigneuse” by Richard Straub, and as “The Lady Leech” by John Duval. Neither edition of the fabliau specifies when it was written. Fabliaux, in general, date from the end of the twelfth century until the beginning of the fourteenth century. These are comic tales that
revolve around play with language and “les histories de maris trompés, de prêtres lubriques, de séducteurs mutilés, et de femmes insatiables” (Zink 219). *La Seineresse*, contrary to what its title foreshadows, centers on a rascal dressed as a lady leech.

The narrative does not contain an actual woman healing practitioner. Its interest lies in its questioning of the title *La Seineresse* and our interpretation depends a great deal on the way Fabliaux have been read by critics until today. In *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, R. Howard Bloch argues that in the Fabliaux masking and unmasking, or clothing and revealing of language play a great role. Bloch goes against critics who propose a literal reading of these tales and who consider them as raw representations of medieval life. Bloch first states that, “the assumed transparency of the fabliaux has been summoned to prove just about anything and everything concerning the social reality of the High Middle Ages—another unsurprising projection given the enormous number and variety of tales involved” (5). He then mentions the historian Marie-Thérèse Lorcin because she has proposed a literal reading of the narratives:

Two recent books in particular herald a new and absurd plateau. Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, using ecclesiastical archives, concludes that the infrequent mention of sexual intercourse in what she delicately refers to as “la position rétro” conforms to actual sexual practice; and by dipping into police files, she infers that “the corpus of the fabliaux offers a tableau of ‘sexual transgression’ thoroughly in keeping with what we find in contemporaneous judicial records.” Similarly, Philippe Ménard’s reading of the fabliaux, despite occasional words of caution, is literal to the extreme. (5-6)

Each reading approach by Lorcin/Ménard and Bloch lead to a different conclusion about the reason for which the author has chosen to call his tale *La Seineresse*. Bloch disagrees with Lorcin and Ménard that the Fabliaux represent the reality of their time. According to Lorcin and Ménard, therefore, the title *La Seineresse* proves that such a title was actually attributed to a specific group of female blood letters, while Bloch would disagree with
such a reading. On the one hand, the text provides a historical context for women practicing medicine, while, on the other hand, it puts into question normative gender constructions.

The primary reading of the fabliau is based on the validity of the tale’s title. Did such a figure as a “seineresse” exist at the time it was written? In the supplement to Ernest Wickersheimer’s *Dictionnaire biographique des médecins en France au Moyen Âge*, Danielle Jacquart provides an overview of the different types of medieval medical practitioners, yet no mention is made of a “seineresse.” The question can, however, be asked differently. Does this fabliau stand as the sole proof that such a title was used and existed at the time? If fictional literature also stands as proof, if what is said in the context of fiction has an “effet de reel,” then *La Seineresse* can add to information collected about the history of the practice of medicine by women in the Middle Ages. Peggy McCracken proposes this type of reading of the tale of Tristan and Iseut and suggests that because the term “miresce” appears in fiction, then it must have been fairly common within medieval society:

Thomas’s *Roman de Tristan* provides an eloquent example of the use of the term and the simultaneous denial of the social status or authority it might accord. At the end of the story the wounded and dying Tristan sends Kaerdin to seek Iseut and bring her to cure him. Iseut is well-known to seek Iseut and bring her to cure him. Iseut is well-known for her healing skills and there is no indication that magic cures are needed or desired—it is for her medical knowledge that Tristan sends for the queen. In order to hide Iseut’s arrival from his wife, he tells Kaerdin to disguise her as a *miresce* (“Pur miriesce la ferez tenir,” Thomas, Douce 1287). The disguise suggests that the sight of a woman doctor is common enough not to raise suspicion, yet nowhere in the text is Iseut herself accorded the title of *miresse*. (248-249)

In *La Seineresse* we also find simultaneous accordance of the status of blood letter to women and the denial and mockery of such a status. If we consider Marie-Thérèse
Lorcin’s reading of the fabliau as a literal representation of medieval life then we can argue that there existed such figures as the “seineresse.” In fact, the interpretation proposed here diverges from Bloch’s and Lorcin’s interpretations. The title of the fabliau lets us imagine that “seineresse” could have indeed existed as a professional title for a specific type of female healing practitioners. The fact that the title of the tale is the title of the female medical practitioner further reinforces this possible reading: the reader is expected to know the meaning of the title before indulging in the story. Yet, at the same time, the title’s main purpose is to address a typical situation in which men and women’s roles are reversed. The title ultimately reveals the existence of “seineresse” in Old French while in no way does it stand as proof that there existed women healing practitioners who were only blood letters. In fact, the story of the fabliau warns readers against women who claim to be lady leeches.

The narrator retrieves the title from the medical practitioner by putting into question the practitioner’s gender identity. According to McCracken, the title of “miresse” is not given Iseut because women’s professionalism was undermined. In the same light, in this fabliau, the title of Seineresse is given not to a woman but to a man. This fabliau then comes to fit with other tales that reveal historical information about the practice of medicine by women. As Peggy McCracken and Monica Green have both noticed, women’s and men’s history cannot be studied in the same fashion since women were denied their professional skills while most men were recognized for them.

The second possible reading, influenced by Howard Bloch’s interpretation of the fabliaux, helps put into question medieval concepts of gender. Bloch stays faithful to the text and to the narrative’s use of and play with language, yet the carnivalesque free play
with language renders more ambiguous the validity of normative gender discourses.

Bloch states that, “What the fabliaux—as speculation upon language as speculation—suggest once again, is how strongly and explicitly the text resists the scholar’s questions; and this refusal to specify an origin, a destination, or even to name itself throws into question the means by which the literary historian has sought up until now to understand—to name—the fabliaux” (19). He tries to show that the fabliaux do not point to a specific destination, but rather that they are a play on the masking and unmasking of language. Some critics have read the narratives literally because of their “raw” language and representation. Bloch rather suggests that these narratives, more than any other fictional genre, question whether there really is a naked language that can be opposed to a “clothed” language. While doing so, the fabliaux destabilize the relationship between words and their meaning, and thus the relationship between the signified and the referent. This questioning within the domain of fiction, then deconstructs the common elements attributed to women and to man respectively through discourse.

The beginning portion of the tale resembles the critique of women included in the prose version of the Dit de l'Herberie"

D'un borgois vous acont la vie,
Qui se vanta de grant folie,
Que fame nel porroit bouler.
Sa fame en a oï parler;
Si en parla privaement
Et en jura un serement
Qu'ele le fera mençongier,
Ja tant ne s'i aura gueter. (1-8)

Just as the prose Herberie shows that women are unable to tell facts as they are, La Seineresse ultimately leads to the conclusion that no man can be as sly and duplicitous as a woman. Both texts then implicitly reinforce the male-female dichotomy and define
gender by claiming heterosexuality to be the norm. Both texts deal with the tension within conjugal relationships, as they both categorize women as devious and men as more naïve, and as unable to maintain control over their partner.

The tale also reinforces the idea that women help generate stronger bonds between men. In the prose Herberie, the quack doctor uses humor to addresses a male audience and generates a tie with them. In the same light, the bourgeois first makes the claim in front of his male friends that he is slyer than women. By claiming to be able to challenge women, the bourgeois can mingle with other men.

The wife, however, begins to challenge her husband without his knowledge. She creates a new triangle by inviting the rascal disguised as a blood letter. As in Rutebeuf's poem, the healer functions here as one who aids women, as he furnishes his aid within a private space where only women can penetrate. Yet, this female persona, like in Rutebeuf's narrative, stands outside of the traditional category of woman since she is in disguise. The title anticipates the female healer character’s presence, but it actually disturbs this anticipation and puts into question for the reader the "nature" of women practicing healing.

The discrepancy between title and narrative generates yet a bigger lack of trust in women healers than in women. While the bourgeois' wife, the only woman in the narrative, keeps as a point of reference her gendered representation, the woman medic generates mistrust in all those who claim to be women practicing medicine. In fact, the text casts doubt upon any person claiming to be a “seineresse.”. From Bloch’s perspective, however, the text’s focus is a play on language more than on reference to medieval life. Because the fabliaux have been read as transparent, Bloch then notices that
“It is thus in the fabliaux that the deep medieval longing for linguistics origins—the time for Babel—fulfills most strongly the philological dream of discovering the original roots of human language along with the romantic wish for the restoration of all things” (8). The fabliaux themselves, however, and according to Bloch, represent a play on language that reveals lack of origin and permeability. Bloch begins his introduction with the fabliau *Le Roy d’Angeleterre et le jongleur d’Ely* and states that:

In the place of answers the king—and the reader—encounters a series of slippages, tautologies, misunderstandings, substitutions, and complete disjunction in which language—and poetic language in particular—is at every turn implied of sense. (16)

*La Seineresse* also contains a series of slippages and misunderstandings that put into question “sen” or meaning itself. Richard Straub clarifies that, “Le titre du fabliau est fondé sur le calembour entre *sainier* ‘saigner’ et *saner/sener* ‘faire du bien,’ ‘être bon’” (71). The title is also written as “Seneresse” in certain editions, allowing us to find a play on the meaning “sen” of the word. The multiple meanings of the title allow for several interpretations that continuously render questionable discourses on women and on gender differences. Bloch mentions Alain de Lille’s association between *Orthodoxy* and *Orthography* and concludes that “what is at loss in the loss of phonetic difference is a loss of sexual determinacy, a loss that Alain again equates with the heteroclitic (and essentially dangerous) nature of poetry” (43). Bloch also states that “at once a robber of robes and a blurrer of sexual difference, the poet embodies the everpresent figure of the transvestite” (44). The current fabliau renders explicit Bloch’s arguments. The narrative continuously undoes what it initially builds with language.

The text thus welcomes other readings that help to displace the function of "seineresse" or medic onto the bourgeois' wife. As the director of her own play, the wife
arranges for the healer to arrive with a bag of suction cups, and she invents a scientifically verifiable disease and prescribes the proper cure for herself.

"Vous dites voir, ma douce amie; montez la sus en cel solier; il m'estuet de voster mestier. ne vous poist," dist ele au borgois, "Quar nous revendrons demanois; j'ai goute es rains molt merveillouse; et, por ce que suis si goutouse; m'estuet li fere un poi sainier." (32-39)

Similarly, when her husband asks her why her face has turned red and why the healing took so long, she plays with the notion of bloodletting and uses the double meaning of medical vocabulary to convey the implicit message that she has had intercourse.

"Sire, merci, por amor Dé, ja ai esté trop travaille; si ne pooie ester sainie." (68-70)

The wife then gives a long and thorough account of how the healer bled her and wore her out, thus revealing two different truths to her husband, the one that he expects to hear and the actual one that has just taken place. As the sinner in the story, the wife is able to displace the meaning of the title from the healer onto herself. By plotting the trick, she makes a fool of both men, and uses the healer to dupe her husband.

A triangulated rapport then appears between the wife, the healer, and the husband. As in Rutebeuf's narrative, the healer functions as an aid to women and she generates a private space for women. This fabliau, however, goes a step further than romance narratives and Rutebeuf's tale in that it literally transforms a homosocial bond into a homoerotic one. Because the healer is dressed as a woman, she plays both a woman and a man and thus puts into question the heterosexual couple's gender representation. Within
the text, there appear homoerotic relationships between a "woman" healer and the wife as well as between a rascal and the husband. Indeed, the healer transitions between playing a woman and a man, since in front of the husband she is healer while in front of the wife she is a rascal. In two instances, the husband flirts with the healer. First, when she arrives at the house, the husband invites her to sit next to him.

\begin{quote}
Et vait le borgois saluer
en mi l'aire de sa meson:
"Dieus soit o vous, sire preudom,
et vous et vostre compaignie!
--Dieu vous gart, dist cil, bele amie,
venez seoir lez moi ici! (20-25)
\end{quote}

The husband does not catch on that the healer, disguised as "plus/ fame que home la moitie," is actually a man. At the end of the narrative, when the bloodletter returns downstairs, the bourgeois makes it explicit once again that he has been charmed by him/her. The bourgeois says to the healer:

\begin{quote}
"Dieus vous saut, dist it, bele amie!
dame, se Dieus vous beneïe,
paietz cele fame mout bien:
ne retenez de soit droit rien
de ce que vous sert en manaie. (53-57)
\end{quote}

His generosity toward the rascal adds to the comic effect of the fabliau, especially since the text plays on the double-entente of the notion of paying. Indeed, the wife replies to the husband that he should not meddle since she has paid him/her generously enough.

The comical role of the healer then reinforces the process of putting into question masculine and feminine gender categories. It parodies religious and poetic discourses in which women are represented as generators of sin. In the previous chapter, Nicolette heals the pilgrim and Aucassin when they see her naked limb. Similarly, in the tale of the Egyptian Mary, this persona makes a sinner of all the men who are aboard the ship with
her. In his analysis of the tale, Benjamin Semple notices that Mary's body, and not Mary herself, is the source of contagion and of sin. The fabliau parodies this type of discourse when it shows that men would be attracted to anything that may be disguised as "plus/\fame que home la moitie." When the husband claims to unravel women's lies, his wife then helps cast doubt upon how he defines and distinguishes between the two gender categories. If their ability to deceive comes to define them, then how does one explain the fact that the husband comes to trust and be attracted to any person dressed as a woman? In the end, the wife tricks her husband by showing him that he does not know how to distinguish between men and women, let alone identify female trickery.

Yet, the healer dupes the husband and not the wife. The bourgeois husband trusts the healer because she carries a bag of suction cups as much as because he may be familiar with this type of female persona. The healer has a paradoxical function within this tale. On the one hand, as stated previously, her representation serves the purpose of belittling blood letters and lady leeches. A second reading, however, would show that she dupes the husband because he believes her to be a “seineresse.” Peggy McCracken, talking about Béroul’s version of Tristan, states that the mere mention of the term “miresse” used by Tristan proves that the term existed at the time. In a similar fashion, we can wonder whether the husband believes the healer because this type of female practitioners of bloodletting actually existed. Just as the mention of “Trotula” creates a parodying of “effet de réel” in Rutebeuf’s poem, in a similar fashion, the “seineresse” as a title falsely lets the reader assume that the tale will be about a woman healing practitioner. Within the economy of the narrative, then, the “seineresse” maintains authority, and the husband never unravels the wife’s ruse for this reason. Rutebeuf uses
Trotula’s fame, and in this way puts forth his own inability to resolve the paradox of using an authoritative female figure in order to belittle women. As the double-meaning of the term “pharmakon” as poison and cure reveals, women healers function both as threat, and as beneficial practitioners of medicine, who in that respect add to the verisimilitude of authors’ stories.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Healer Intervenes in the Lady’s Destiny in *Le roman de la Violette*  

“*La sorcière, comme Dieu, se situe à l’intersection de la vie et de la mort. Elle peut guérir. Elle peut tuer.*”  
Robert Muchembled.

The thirteenth-century *Roman de la Violette* by Gerbert de Montreuil belongs to what Gaston Paris names “le cycle de la gageure.” It revolves around rivalry between two knights for a lady and for territorial gain. A fifteenth-century anonymous prose version of the romance also exists, yet the current chapter will mainly consist of an examination of the earlier version by Gerbert. The narrative centers on the relationship between the knight Gérard de Nevers and his beloved Eurïant, as Gérard stakes his estate on his wife’s fidelity. Eurïant is falsely accused of infidelity at court because the knight Lisiart de la Forest claims to have seen the violet-shaped beauty mark on her right breast.

Gerbert’s romance thus revolves around an initial love triangle. Eurïant becomes the love object that Lisiart desires because she belongs to Gerart. In a way, Eurïant becomes object of exchange like Gerart’s territory. Proving her infidelity and possessing her translate into possessing the hero’s territory as well. When the healers intervene, however, they seem to pull the strings so that Gerart and Lisiart appear to be under the spell of their words, their actions, and their concoctions. First, Gondrée, Eurïant’s governess, who is described as a malevolent witch, directs Lisiart’s gaze onto the heroine’s body and reveals to him the beauty mark in the shape of a violet on her breast.
The second healer, also a governess, appears on Gerart’s journey back to his Lady. This healer helps her Lady, Aiglente, temporarily possess Gerart by giving him a love potion. The spell of the love potion is undone when Gerart finds his beloved’s ring. The third persona, Aigline, is a damsel in distress who seeks the hero’s help when her castle is attacked. She wipes the blood off his face and allows him to see, or understand, the gravity of his mistake. The final healer, Marote, saves Gerart when he gives up hope and tries to starve himself. She comforts the hero by listening to his story and providing useful advice and by physically restoring his health.

Gerbert de Montreuil’s work portrays both the care giving healer and the egotistical witch and the episodes in which appear the healer, nurse, and witch can only be studied in light of the role of the narrative’s main characters: Gerart and Eurïant. The couple must overcome many obstacles in order to save their love and friendship. Lisiart’s role is to introduce suspense in the narrative, while each healer inserts a turning point and pulls the narrative in a new direction. The healers disturb the initial triangle by intervening and manipulating the knights in their own fashion. Eurïant’s relationship with the healers reveals a possible restructuring of the Gerart-Lisiart-Eurïant triangle that generates homosocial bonding.

**Gondrée Deconstructs the Eurïant Type**

In the beginning of the narrative appears Gondrée, Eurïant’s chambermaid, who is described as a witch. Her presence forces us to present an overview of the late medieval and early modern witch-hunts. Furthermore, though it is true that the witch mainly surfaces at the end of the Middle Ages, Gerbert’s Gondrée does indeed greatly resemble descriptions of this figure found in witch trials and in demonological literature. Yet,
Gerbert’s work appears more than two centuries before the witch hunts, and so the association between the current work and later witch trials may seem anachronistic. An overview of the historical context of the trials, however, will allow us to show how discourses on women help to explain why the fact that roughly 80% of persons accused were women.  

In fact, in *Malleus Maleficarum* fingers are most pointed at women as witches rather than at male magicians (Briggs 259).

Critics have differing opinions on the reasons for the hunts, yet most critics agree that a majority of the victims were female. This fact stems not from a new anti-feminist sentiment, but from a pejorative view of women present since the early Middle Ages. The biblical figures of Lilith and Eve helped influence the medieval population’s negative ideas about women and made it easier to blame them. Most recorded trials resemble each other because certain set elements characterized the figure of the witch, and thus often prompted witnesses and the accused—under torture—to voice similar formulaic statements. The historians studying witch trials find significant attributes toward

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80 Robin Briggs provides the following statistics of the trials: “The best-informed recent estimates place the total number of executions for witchcraft in Europe somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000, figures which allow for a reasonable level of lost documentation. Men actually made up around 25 per cent of this total, although there were large variations from one area to another and different between different types of trials” (260).

81 “Women comprised perhaps 75-80 per cent of known victims of the European and North American witch persecutions. But to call the witch hunts an attack on women or to point to misogyny as the pre-eminent factor in producing the trials leaves several problems unexplained” (Thurston, 65). Muchembled’s *La sorcière au village*, by its mere title, shows that the witch hunts mostly posed a problem for women healer-witches than for male figures. In fact, Muchembled uses the French expression “chercher la femme” to speak of the reasons underlying the fact that “la répression vise une écrasante majorité de femmes” (Muchembled 130).

82 Robert Thurston claims that the negative conceptualization of women stems from the time of Charlemagne, when it was established “in the Roman Church the view that women, widely deluded by the devil, often believed that they went out at night to march with Diana” (81). Thurston also speaks of the popularization of the biblical figure of Lilith later in the Middle Ages: “In late medieval Europe, Lilith became Satan’s concubine in stories and legends” (87). Muchembled, on the other hand, claims that “[Les femmes] tiennent à la vieille méfiance des gens d’Eglise contre les filles d’Ève” (131).

83 “L’incitation semble prévenir du haut de la société...Car le stéréotype de la sorcière avait été forgé par les démonologues et présenté aux masses à la pastorale et le spectacle fréquent des bûchers, que précédait une lecture publique des sentences” (Muchembled 88). Robin Briggs goes yet further, to claim that “Historical
witches in medieval fiction. Robin Briggs says that “more recently the term ‘witch-hunt’ has entered the language to express the general idea of a paranoid search for hidden deviants” (7), whereas in the Middle Ages deviants known as witches were accused of specific crimes. Briggs notices that “the popular image of the witch was that of a person motivated by ill-will and spite who lacked the proper sense of neighborhood and community” (23); while Thurston concludes that “a group of highly-placed churchmen and women were put to death on charges of holding orgies, which included sex with near relatives, killing infants and using their blood to make a potion that all participants drank, and worshipping the devil, who appeared among them as a large black cat or other animal” (53). The witch trials were partly a result of an attempt by the Church to regain control over deviants (Thurston 58) and the accusers invented the figure of the witch because, as Muchembled states, it was easy to toy with the peasants’ fears of death, illness, and the unpredictable: “ils considéraient la maladie et la mort comme des monstres, en d’autres termes comme des ruptures de l’ordre naturel des choses, et ils avaient recours pour se protéger à de multiples pratiques magiques” (40). And gradually, the village healer was assimilated to the figure of the witch who was controlled by Satan.

The figure of the witch present in Gerbert de Montreuil’s Violette closely resembles descriptions of witches found in demonological literature of the later Middle Ages, even if Gondrée is not directly associated with black magic or Satan. Gondrée, Euriant’s maîtresse, is described as cunning because she shows Lisiart how to prove

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European witchcraft is quite simply fiction in the sense that there is no evidence that witches existed, still less that they celebrated black masses or worshipped strange gods” (Briggs 6).

84 “On remarquera que surgit ainsi une sorte de confusion entre les superstitions, l’action des devins et des guérisseurs, celle des sorciers et l’omniprésence de sorcellerie est pour bientôt” (51).
Eurïant’s infidelity to Gerart, and the story unfolds as follows. At the court of King Louis, Gerart sings and boasts of his beloved’s fidelity. Lisiart de Forest challenges Gerart in his assertion and the two knights wager their territory over Eurïant’s love. Lisiart tries to charm his rival’s *amie* with courtly rhetoric, but fails to reach his goal. As a result, Gondrée, Eurïant’s *maîtresse*, decides to help Lisiart in exchange for a gift of the rival’s territory. Though she is not allowed to see her lady taking a bath, she sneaks a look and catches a glimpse of the mark in the shape of a violet on Eurïant’s breast. Then, following Gondrée’s gaze, Lisiart also notices the violet mark, and knowledge of this mark ultimately enables him to claim Gerart’s territory.

In the beginning of the narrative, with Gerart and Lisiart at the king’s court, we encounter a three-way rapport that echoes the triangle of mediated desire sketched by René Girard. Lisiart competes with Gerart to win Eurïant’s love. The love rivalry then translates into rivalry about land ownership and creates a direct correlation between possessing Eurïant and possessing Gerart’s or Lisiart’s territory. If Lisiart can claim possession of Eurïant, he can claim possession of her lover’s territory. This gamble is actually based on whether the rival has access to the lady’s body. Sexualizing Eurïant’s

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85 The term “maîtresse” has several meanings in Old French narrative. The term is almost equivalent to the modern English notion of governess. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “mistress” as “something personified as female that rules or dominates.” The Old French term can take on several meanings depending on the context. Greimas’ *Dictionnaire de l’ancien français* defines “maîtresse” as “maîtresse, amante.” Under the same term of “maistre, mestre,” Greimas defines “maistrier” as “élever, diriger.” Gondrée’s role in relation to Eurïant can be defined as the person taking care of, raising, and being in charge of the Lady. The same term “maistrier” can also mean “malmener, tourmenter” or “étreindre, faire souffrir en serrant trop.” In Rutebeuf’s “Dit de l’Herberie”, however, the “maîtresse” was Trotula, as in the latin notion of *magistra*. Greimas’ *Dictionnaire* also includes the term “maistrie” which is defined as “science médicale” or as “supériorité due à la science, au savoir-faire, au talent.” The different variations of the term become interesting once we study the role of the governess as healer. The authority of the governess increases with her healing talents, and therefore make of her a person capable to use her power and influence for “malmener, tourmenter.” The amount of authority provided the “maîtresse” must thus be controlled.

86 “The value of Eurïant’s body, though, derives not from a threat of absence, but from its subtle links to Gerart’s land” (Burr 8).
body through the violet on her breast enables the male characters to objectify her and compare her to Gerart’s other possessions. Like the knight’s land, she becomes a commodity that can be exchanged between knights.

Gondrée introduces a change into this triangulated construction. On the one hand, she encourages bonding between men and contributes to the process of objectification of the lady, while, on the other hand, she mediates men’s gaze upon Eurïant’s body. She helps to establish a new triangulated rapport between herself, Lisiart, and Eurïant that is based on economic gain and not on erotic rivalry as in the Girardian love triangle.87

Eurïant and Gondrée are defined by the elements that make one female figure the antithesis of the other. While Eurïant represents the prototype of the lady, Gondrée embodies the attributes of the type of woman who transgresses the norms of femininity. The description of each character allows us to illustrate this contrast between them.

Gondrée is described as old and mischievous:

La vielle, qui maistresse fu
Oriïant, sis dalès le fu;
Laide et oscure avoit la chiere,
Molt, estoit desloiaus sorchière;
Gondrée avoit la vielle a non,
Fille ert Gontacle le larron;
Si l’ot d’une fausse beguine,
Por chou de jou, tels est m’entente:
De put rachine pute ente.
De pute cime estoit atraite
La vielle desloiaus retraite.
Deus enfans ot qu’ele ot mordris,
Qu’engenrés ot qu’ele mordris,
Un moignes de la Carité,
Qu’ele avoit de l’ordre jeté.
Plus savoit la vielle d’engien
Qu’entre Thessala ne Brangien
Ne sorent oncques, che m’est avis.” (503-519)

87 The new triangle does not, however, come to neglect the already-established schema that is based on Eurïant and territorial propriety. Gondrée introduces a triangle that overlaps with the initial triangle.
Gondrée knows more wicked tricks than Thessala and Brangien; she fits within the category of these types of women who play a secondary role in literature and who have used magic and their knowledge of herbs. In Chrétien de Troyes’ *Cligès*, Thessala, Fenice’s nurse, is knowledgeable in the art of necromancy. She uses a “philter” to put Fenice in a coma so that the townspeople might claim her dead. Brangien appears in the legend of Tristan as Iseut’s *chambrière*. She is given a love potion by Iseut’s mother that the princess is to drink on the night of her marriage to King Mark. Brangien accidentally gives the potion to Tristan and Iseut thus igniting the love affair between them. Gondrée surpasses her predecessors in craftiness because she works independently, and she intends to gain power and territory. Thessala and Brangien collaborated with the female protagonists of their respective narratives, namely Fenice and Iseut, but Gondrée, on the other hand, tricks Eurïant as much as Gerart. By comparing Gondrée to Thessala and Brangien then, Gerbert de Montreuil insinuates that all three characters can be blamed for the main couples’ misfortunes. In this way, Gerbert undoes the ties that initially existed between Thessala and Fenice as well as between Brangien and Iseut.

When Gerbert places Gondrée, Brangien, and Thessala in the same category, he condemns all three figures, though his own character proves more devious and more dangerous than the others. He calls her a “sorcière,” and she does not practice healing like Thessala, nor does she put to use an herbal love potion as does Brangien. Through her actions, and through the elaborate description of her ill nature and upbringing, Gondrée intertextually contaminates Thessala and Brangien, two figures who in their original contexts do possess a good nature. Generating a means of escape for Iseut and
Fenice respectively, those two female figures strengthen homosocial bonds between
cwomen; they offer their knowledge, a potion, and/or collaboration. Unlike Thessala, who
uses her knowledge of magic to create a potion, Brangien is only to blame for giving the
love potion to the wrong couple. Gerbert omits this difference between the two characters
so as to suggest that Brangien’s ill nature puts her in the same category as the female
characters that have actively practiced healing in order to change the proper course of
events.

Because she is defined as a “sorcière,” Eurïant’s maîtresse appears as the
thirteenth-century malevolent type of healer. In the Godefroy dictionary, the term
“sorceor” or “sorcier” is defined as “enchanteur” and the term “sorceron” is defined as
“philter.” Finally, as in modern French, the term “sorcerie” means “sorcellerie,”
“sortilege,” or “maléfice.” In the Middle Ages, the distinction between magic,
superstition, and black magic was a thin one. The description of the witch presented by
Gerbert de Montreuil compares to what Muchembled has found in late medieval witch
trials: “L’aspect sexuel du procès est néanmoins généralement lié à la décrépitude d’un
corps de vieille femme plus qu’aux débordements amoureux d’une jeune sorcière” (134).
Muchembled mentions the connection between youth and love, and this detail does
indeed correlate with Gerbert’s description of his “sorcière.” The anti-healer, the
empoisonneuse, is driven by hatred and power while she lacks characteristics that help
define women’s personality. She is devoid of love for children, and she is seen as
practicing taboo sex, since she has had intercourse with a monk. By calling Gondrée
“sorchière,” Gerbert links her ill nature to her knowledge of healing and magic and blurs the distinction between white and black magic.88

Gondrée’s ill nature is a result of her “pute rachine” and it can be proven by her past actions. The attributes that place Gondrée outside the categories of “pucelle,” “dame” or “amie” bear out Monique Wittig's critique of the cultural limits set for women. Wittig draws on Marxist theory to explain women’s supposed condition within heterosexual relationships:

La catégorie de sexe est le produit de la société hétérosexuelle dans laquelle les hommes s’approprient pour eux-mêmes la reproduction et la production des femmes ainsi que leurs personnes physiques au moyen d’un contrat qui s’appelle le contrat de mariage. (Wittig 47)

Wittig’s statement underlines women’s dependency on their reproductive function. She also emphasizes the fact that their reproductive function has been the element preventing them from participating equally in the working world. According to Wittig, men have maintained control over women so that they could not economically profit nor participate equally in the working world because they are bound to the home by the marriage contract. Wittig’s definition of the “catégorie de sexe” proves interesting, and she suggests that being a woman means being able to reproduce and thus have a specific type of relationship with the child. According to this a priori, women can only find their definition within a heterosexual relationship that defines how women should react towards children and members of the opposite sex with whom they should have intimate relations. Discourses on women in medieval literature often defined them by their sex and/or by their reproductive function; they are “puciele,” “amante,” spouse, or mother. Gondrée exemplifies the type of female character, described as “sorchière,” who chooses

88 “La différence traditionnelle entre magie noire et magie blanche est à n’en pas douter une distinction savante, une invention due aux élites culturelles” (49).
to use her ruse to gain capital. She transgresses the traditional form of exchange because she gains advantages or monetary compensation for her talents/knowledge. She tricks the system and makes it difficult to control her production.

Because Gondrée does not act as Eurïant’s helper, she is condemned. Compared with Lisiart, who remains a distinguished knight despite his ill nature, Gondrée’s actions are justified in the text by the fact that she is of “pute rachine.” Eve Sedgwick uses the example of the figure of Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* to explain how sexualizing and de-sexualizing the female body are used for political ends.89

And for Mammy, her mind and life, in this view, are totally *in thrall* to the ideal of the “lady” but in relation that excludes herself entirely: she is the template, the support, the enforcement, of Scarlett’s “lady” role, to the degree that her personal femaleness loses any meaning whatever that is not in relation to Scarlett’s role. (9)

Gondrée is the anti-Mammy figure as much as she is the anti-Eurïant figure. Unlike Mammy, she breaks the silence and no longer plays the role of “the template, the support, the enforcement” of Eurïant’s role as Lady. Her desire for power and financial gain makes her a dangerous figure. Sedgwick talks about the continuity between homosocial and homoerotic relations between women as being more accepted than between men.

Yet, it seems that, the close relation between women is only accepted so far as it does not supply them with the possibility to be free of direct male control or ownership. Sedgwick and Wittig claim that the concept of woman or “la femme” has value only within specific contexts. This threatening possibility of showing how gender is culturally, or politically, constructed helps explain why some healers, in Gerbert de Montreuil’s *Le Roman de la Violette*, appear as cunning figures while others do not pose such a threat to the cultural

89 Sedgwick refers to both the book and the movie (9).
status quo. The healer who has no interest in helping the main protagonists is blamed for desiring to accumulate territory or capital, while the nurse who brings the couple together is portrayed as benevolent.

Gondrée's ill nature coincides for the narrator with her lack of motherly love, which he amplifies into infanticide: “dues enfans ot qu’ele ot mordris.” Just as Wittig explains that women’s source of production and exploitation is their reproductive attribute, Gondrée has been placed outside of the realm of normative womanhood by the example of her aggression toward her own children. She is also denied access to the category of Lady because of her sexual promiscuity, since she corrupted a monk. Furthermore, Gondrée’s old age contributes to depicting her as the typical dangerous and devious “sorchière.” According to Eve Sedgwick’s interpretation, Mammy’s lack of femaleness comes to reinforce Scarlett’s lady-like femininity. Gondrée does stand in juxtaposition to Eurïant so as to reinforce her Lady’s femininity. Yet, unlike Mammy, she puts into question her own status and femaleness once she uses her Lady to gain territory. Gondrée’s description as sexually deviant rather denounces a fear of female figures that do not enter into traditional institutions of marriage and the convent. Furthermore, her ability to use her knowledge for material gain proves most threatening.

The witch’s gender identity remains ambiguous and thus threatening, while Eurïant’s sexual and gender identities directly correspond, as it is so fore grounded by the title of the romance. From the start, the birthmark, in the shape of a violet, becomes paradoxically a symbol both of a woman’s faithfulness and of her infidelity. Christine Burr states that “The birth mark, although uncovered only once, plays a crucial role: it

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90 “Gondrée, the quintessential traitress, is provided with depraved parentage to underscore the depths of her villainy” (Baldwin 128).
provides the impetus for action in the romance and is the source of Eurïant’s misfortunes” (8). Burr adds that the birthmark brings to the forefront Eurïant’s sexualized and objectified body (8). Finally, She adds that “the story of courtliness is inscribed on Eurïant in the form of the mark of the violet, symbolic of a courtly world in which woman functions as possession” (8). The critic’s interpretation correlates with Wittig’s argument that women’s production belongs to the men who possess them. Burr’s comments remind us that the construction of Eurïant’s gender identity plays a crucial role within the romance.

Kathy Krause, on the other hand, associates the sight of Eurïant’s naked body with the moment at which Adam and Eve discover nakedness. “The sight of the naked female body provides knowledge to Lisiart, but it is knowledge that he will only wrongly equate with sexual knowledge” (25). On a similar note, Krause states that Eurïant's violet is misconstrued by the court. “In a reversal of the terms of Adam and Eve’s primal scene of knowledge and nakedness, Lisiart and the court associate knowing Eurïant’s sign with having seen it and assume that this in turn implies knowing her as a woman and thus as a sexual and sinful being” (30). The theme of seeing plays a large part in the way the author conveys his message to the reader. The text seems to be playing with the notion that “seeing is believing.” As I will later show in greater detail, the author tries to make a distinction between seeing in the sense of understanding and gaining spiritual clarity and seeing in the more literal sense of seeing with his eyes. If Lisiart’s sight of Eurïant’s body has led to the court believing a false truth, then readers may assume that in the first part of the narrative the heroine’s identity is problematized, and her role put into question. Despite this possible reading, the fact remains that her sexuality remains omnipresent.
In her feminist reading of *Le roman de la Violette*, Roberta Krueger also touches on the appropriation of women’s production and reproduction. Krueger studies Gerbert’s work within the context of wager romances, a term coined by Gaston Paris. This narrative does indeed present the prototypical triangulated relations found in what Paris calls “le cycle de la Gageure” (Paris 535). Krueger argues that the “displacement of woman and the appropriation of her power” is mystified because the heroine is first oppressed then glorified for her good deeds because of her knight. In some of the tales of the wager cycle, especially the Indian and Greek versions mentioned by Paris, the heroine plays a more active role, Yet, Krueger’s argument remains true even when applied to those eastern narratives. The woman’s glorification inescapably depends on the knight’s recognition of his mistake. By reducing the Lady to a sexual being, the two knights can put to the forefront their right to possess her. The mark of the violet plays a crucial role in the romance as it correlates Gerart’s fate with Eurïant’s sexuality. Once she enters into a relationship with Gerart, Eurïant becomes his possession. She surrenders to her partner’s control. Krueger says, “rather than read the trials of virtuous heroines as a reflection of the high moral status accorded to historical women, let us consider the evident displacement of woman’s sexual and reproductive autonomy that the romances inscribe” (24). Eurïant can only be rescued by Gerart, she must be re-possessed by him even though she has once been dispossessed by him. Krueger places special focus on the heroine’s role in wager cycle romances and thus neglects the role of Gondrée and other

91 “The stories’ celebratory exemplification of female virtue, be it active or passive, obscures the fact of woman’s primary appropriation in the feudal marriage system; the crude terms of the wager are apparently reversed in the happy ending. Even in that romance where the narrator’s social critique and his heroine’s autonomy are the most remarkable, the *Guillaume de Dole*, the heroine remains above all an object of the narrator’s appropriation and mystification” (Krueger 26).

92 “Women, however, are assigned the function of love in all of Jean’s and Gerbert’s romances. To desire and become the reciprocal objects of men is their principal role” (Burr 141).
Yet, considering Gondrée’s function further reinforces the argument that women’s power must be displaced and appropriated by male figures. Krueger mentions that women’s ability “to produce and reproduce their own meaning” has been appropriated by male writers who are mostly influenced by a male audience. Gondrée is punished for wanting to undo herself of this process of appropriation. Wanting to gain property and a better social status, she is then placed in the category of witches.

The poet describes Eurïant’s elaborate clothing in 44 lines and compares her to “la roïne Flourenche,/ Qui emperereis fu de Romme” (821-822) and to Aude from *La Chanson de Roland*. He also calls her clothing so shiny that “Harpe ne viële, ne rote/ne rendent pas si douce note” (852-853). The narrator resorts to the use of cross-sensory metaphor of of the musical instruments and his reference to the softness of the note in order to show how the dress embodies Eurïant’s femininity. After describing her clothing, the poet turns to her body and emphasizes her white skin and her perfect allure:

\begin{verbatim}
Gente fu de cors et adroite,  
Par flans deliée et estroite,  
HANCE ot basse sous la chaïnture,  
Et molt fu de biele stature;  
Cief or crespé, luisant et sor,  
De coulour resambloient d’or;  
Front ot blanc com voirre poli.  
\end{verbatim}

The author also mentions the color of her eyes, the size of her nose, the shape and color of her eyebrows. Eurïant’s body and clothing reveal a typical tendency within most medieval narratives to assign attributes to the main protagonist that reveal her sexual identity and, in this way, she encompasses the ideal image of the lady of noble birth.
Unlike the heroine, her nurse's “pute rachine” goes hand in hand with her unappealing physical appearance, her lack of motherly love and her sexual promiscuity. On the other hand, whereas the heroine correlates with Gerart’s land, her nurse's access to knowing Eurïant’s violet provides her the possibility to turn that symbolic acquisition into material and economic profit. When Gerart leaves on his own adventures, he disguises himself as a *jongleur* and is invited to perform for Lisiart. Seeing Gondrée and Lisiart dining together, Gerart realizes his mistake and he also overhears his betrayers discussing how they used trickery to win over Gerart’s land. Gondrée also takes advantage of the moment to remind Lisiart of her important role as well as her right to ownership of some of Gerart’s land:

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Gondrée manga o le conte;  
Et si li reprove et aconte  
Que par li ot il gaegnié  
La terre dont a engignié  
Sa damoisiele et son soignour,  
Et avoit tolu s’ounour  
Sans chou que mesfait ne l’avoit.  
Lisiars, ki tres bien savoit  
Qu’ele li disoit verité  
Li jure sous sa loiauté  
Qu’ele puet bien de fi savoir  
Que tout est sien, tierre et avoir.  
(1441-1452)
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By falsely denouncing Eurïant, Gondrée advances from the status of a servant to that of land owner and of having control over Lisiart’s possessions. Standing in opposition to the lady of the narrative, the first healer, Gondrée, thus embodies the type of femininity seen as devious and dangerous because she holds power over her body and is aware of the exchange value of women within patriarchal societies. Gondrée utilizes her lady’s body to gain property in the same fashion that Gerart and Lisiart have done so.
By desiring to better her social situation, Gondrée endangers both herself and her lady, who is then perceived by the court as “as a sexual sinful being” (30). The two women’s interaction proves dangerous: one treacherously contaminates the other’s reputation with a derivative of her own sexual ill-fame.93

Aiglente’s Nurse

In addition to Gondrée, there appears another maîtresse, Aiglente’s nurse. This healer is endowed with the knowledge of herbs, though this same knowledge is devalued by the circumstances that require her to use her skills. The presence of this character may seem to contradict the belief that healers are represented as dreadful and cunning figures in thirteenth-century Old French romances. Healers do appear quite often in romances of this period, but most authors choose to downplay their medical knowledge in order to place focus on their ability to reunite or generate bonds between couples. Peggy McCracken examines an array of healer-types in medieval literature and comes to argue that, “despite the demonstration of knowledge and skills which correspond to accepted contemporary medical practice, these women are never called doctors (miresses) in medieval stories; the healing effects of their actions are usually attributed to magic” (McCracken 240). McCracken mentions two distinct factors that lead readers of medieval texts to neglect women healing practitioners’ medical knowledge: first, these healers are never endowed with a title, and, second, their healing is “attributed to magic.” The critic’s first statement rings true because the term “mire” appears often in Old French romances, while “miresse” is highly infrequent. Yet, as modern readers, we must wonder whether some medieval authors, including perhaps Gerbert de Montreuil, refashion old

93 “Connaître le signe secret porté sur une partie érotisée du corps, équivaut par métonymie à posséder la femme toute entière” (146).
fables and stories in a way to render them more credible by describing healing scenes through common medical practices or medical knowledge that they may possess.

McCracken argues that medieval authors provide little detail about the healers’ medical practice so they can stand at the threshold between fairies, magical healers, and actual medical practitioners. In other words, it is questionable whether the female-magician of old tales also takes on attributes of a medieval medical practitioner. In the texts examined thus far, healers seem to possess a combined knowledge of magic and medicine.

McCracken’s interpretation simply reminds us that most authors do, indeed, place more emphasis on the healers’ knowledge of magic than on their medical skills. In Gerbert’s Violette, Aiglente’s nurse resorts to the use of magic. Yet, other healers mainly treat the psychologically ill knight and thus their knowledge of medicine is eclipsed by their role as couple counselors.

Aiglente’s nurse, like Iseut’s mother, makes a potion in order to engender love between Gerart and her lady. The episode unfolds as follows: when Gerart arrives in Cologne, he fights against the Saxons and wins over the love of the Duke of Milon’s daughter Aiglente. Gerart admits to her that he is in love with another woman. When this lady’s governess finds her in a state of agony, she proposes to put together a love “puison” that so Gerart forgets Eurïant and finds attraction toward Aiglente:

L’uis de la chamber desserra,
Puis est entrée en un vergié,
N’i a mie gramment targié,
De plusiours herbes querant va.
(3424-3427)

Rushes into a grove and with gathering distinct herbs, the healer concocts a love potion, which may be a reference to Iseut’s mother’s love potion given to Brangien for Iseut in
the legend of Tristan.94 In Thomas’s Tristan, the potion is accidentally consumed by Tristan and Iseut and thus begins their love affair. In Gerbert de Montreuil’s romance, Gerart is tricked into love by Aiglente’s nurse. He becomes love blind once he drinks the “puison” and entirely forgets Eurïant. The maîtresse’s healing practice is downgraded for two reasons. First, the fact that Gerart eventually wakes from the effect of the potion proves that true love wins over love that has been concocted. Also, the fact that Gerart’s battle wounds are cured by male surgeons, while the love potion only serves non-medical purposes, betokens the lack of regard shown for women’s knowledge of herbs and healing.95

Yet, the nurse does enable Aiglente to act upon her desire to be with Gerart. This couple’s marriage would help constitute a more traditional type of alliance. Gerart has fought alongside the duke of Milon and has defeated the Saxons. The marriage alliance would benefit Aiglente and her father while providing Gerart with land ownership. The alliance would, however, preclude a Gerart-Eurïant reconciliation and would further prevent Gerart from recovering his land and inheritance. While the nurse temporarily provides a voice for Aiglente, she also represents an obstacle to the morally prescribed dénouement that unites the two main protagonists.96

Aiglente’s nurse resembles other female healing practitioners of medieval literature. Like Brangien, Iseut’s mother, Thessala, and other female characters, she intervenes in order to give more authority to another female character. She allows

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94 “Au moment où Gerart prend congé d’Aiglente, celle-ci lui présente la coupe fatale, souvenir parodique de la légende de Tristan et Iseut” (Demaules 147).
95 “Mais ce stratagème qui suppose un savoir astucieux et une connaissance intime de la nature, car il faut connaître les herbes cueillies, est en fait violemment condamné par Gerbert qui l’assimile à une sorcellerie et à un expedient anti-courtois” (Demaules 149).
96 “The conclusion of Le Roman de la Violette portrays the reestablishment of a traditional courtly society. Eurïant’s wedding to Gerart reintegrates her into the courtly world effectively the marks that tell a story from the young woman’s perspective” (Burr 13).
Aiglente to fight for Gerart, to act upon her desire to be with the one she loves. Gerbert seems to condemn these types of secondary female characters who interfere with the natural course of events. Her magic is only temporary, and Gerart’s strong spiritual connection to Eurïant eventually undoes the magical powers of her love potion.

During this same episode, Gerart’s wounds are healed by male surgeons. These men intervene when Gerart is wounded on the battlefield, whereas the nurse intervenes when Aiglente needs a magic potion that would prevent Gerart from leaving. By introducing the male practitioners, Gerbert further circumscribes and even trivializes the nurse’s knowledge of medicine. Aiglente’s healer does not appear as much a threat as Gondrée, though her concoction temporarily prevents the hero from reaching the expected and traditionally accepted goal of winning the maiden.

Healers as Mediators: Marote and Aigline

_Le Roman de la Violette_ also contains examples of healing practitioners who help establish female-female-male relationships. Traditionally, triangulated relationships consist of characters that appear simultaneously and that establish a bond by being present in the same episode. In Gerbert de Montreuil’s romance, the link between Eurïant and both second female figures is constituted indirectly and in the most subtle fashion. The two benevolent female practitioners of medicine are Aigline and Marote. Aigline comes first in the sequence of the narration and the episode in which she appears directly precedes the one in which appears Marote. Analyzing this sequence helps to show the correlation between the two episodes.

The relationship between Aigline and Gerart is one the medieval audience can trace back to Chrétien’s _Conte du Graal_. Aigline is a damsel in distress, similar in type to
the figure of Blanchefleur in the *Graal*. Her castle is attacked by Galerant who wants to force her into marriage with him. Gerart accidentally finds the castle and fights for Aigline against her malevolent suitor. He comes to her rescue and kills Galerant. As a reward, Aigline offers her love to Gerart, who spurns it and tells her about Eurïant. Before he leaves, he undergoes treatment for the severe wounds he has received.

Healing takes place in both literal and more metaphoric senses. The term “garir” encompasses both curing and saving someone’s life and medieval poets often play with the dual meaning of the term. Aigline practices healing in a more figurative sense, whereas a young female nurse is later assigned the task of treating the knight’s battle wounds. Aigline finds Gerart after the battle and wipes the blood and sweat off his face. The narrative places strong emphasis on sight in both literal and figurative senses. As mentioned earlier, the sight of Eurïant’s naked body is falsely associated with carnal knowledge of her. Sight and seeing prove unreliable sources of knowledge: limited empirical observation does not suffice, and an understanding through faith is necessary to complement and complete knowing and understanding. Even though Lisiart justly claims that he has seen the violet, his covert glimpse does not prevent the final vindication of Eurïant’s reputation and her faithfulness to Gerart.\(^7\)

The poet plays with the two meanings of seeing and gradually shows that Gerart should have “seen” Eurïant through his love and not through what others had witnessed on her body. The double meanings of the notion of seeing initially appear when Aigline wipes Gerart’s face and introduces the first step toward healing Gerart’s emotional turmoil:

\(^7\) Krause notes, “I do not want to argue that Lisiart’s voyeuristic sight of Eurïant’s body does not constitute a violation but rather that the representation of that fact of looking clearly identifies it as a violation” (Krause 24).
La puciele sa main li couche
Sor son viaire, et il essue
Et tert les iex et la veüe,
Que il avoit tous plains de sanc;
Vermel en fist son cainse blanc.
Quant ele li ot les iex ters,
Un petitet li a ouvers. (2087-2093)

Gerbert first introduces spiritual vision and follows it with the knight’s physical healing. Once sweat and blood are wiped off his face, the knight wakes from his temporary coma and he is finally able to open his eyes, though only slightly. Aigline spiritually helps Gerard reach Eurïant. His return journey begins once he catches sight of Eurïant’s ring, and Aigline is the first female character on this journey to allow him to get a glimpse of his initial mistake. Her intervention indirectly relates to healing.

Aigline then entrusts Gerart to a young female nurse who treats his wounds. In the previous episode, male surgeons had healed Gerart’s battle wounds while Aiglente’s nurse was concocting the love potion. In the current sequence, Aigline summons a female nurse to physically treat her knight. Gerart’s wounds are less serious, however, and thus entrusting him to a female nurse proves sufficient. The nurse thus functions more as a care taker than as a medical practitioner:

Une puciele molt courtoise
L’a pris en cure pour garir.
Encor li pora bien merir
Li chevaliers, se il respasse.
La puciele un petit d’espasse
Le fait forment assouagier,
Tant que il puet boire et mangier
Et k’il parolle bien a iaus,
Et le garde de poivre et d’aus.
(2131-2139)
The episode of healing in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Erec et Enide* also includes advice that the patient should keep away from pepper and garlic. After helping him to better health, Aigline confesses her love to Gerart and reluctantly accepts the reasons he gives for leaving. Unlike Aiglente, she does not seek to force Gerart to fall in love with her. Indirectly at least, Aigline opens Gerart’s eyes and reinforces his drive to reach Eurîant. Marote is yet another character who heals Gerart. She is the daughter of a bourgeois host, Guyon the Great, with whom Gerart stays after falling ill from physical weakness and from mental distress. Gerart’s depression makes him physically ill and he can no longer eat or drink (2247). While he is resting in bed in Chalon, he overhears the bourgeois’ daughter Marote recite a “chanchon a toile,” about Eurîant and Renaut. The song describes Eurîant as being in the same state of distress over her lover as Gerart is over his beloved:

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Que par son chant forment s’alose:
« Siet soi biele Eurîaus, seule est enclose;
Ne boit ne ne manguë ne ne repose. »
(2302-2304)
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The song implicitly applies also to Gerart’s state, since he feels too guilty to eat or drink. Marote prompts Gerart to realize that his absence has put Eurîant in a state similar to his. Just as Aigline’s act of wiping sweat and blood off Gerart’s eyes led him to seeing and understanding his mission, Marote’s song leads to Gerart’s second awakening from passivity. He comes to realize that only by forgetting Eurîant does he fall ill:

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“Par moi meïsme voel prouver
Que ki sa bonne amor oublie,
Son sens et sa forche afoiblie.
N’est merveille si j’afoiblie,
Quant cheli ai mise en oubli,
Ki par s’amour me fait valoir;
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Mais trop l’ai mise en noncaloir”
(2321-2327)

Thanks to Marote, Gerart is reminded of Eurïant’s love and therefore the song provides him the necessary strength to regain his appetite. In addition to awakening his mind and heart, Marote becomes his confidante (“Gerars li a tout conneü” (2381)). She also offers him advice about his situation:

“Mais c’est li sens de bel tenir
Que cil qui a sa bonne amie
Sachies esprouver nel doit mie,
Ains le doit adiès tenir chiere.”
(2393-2396)

When she is preaching to the knight, Marote comes to resemble the healer in Marie de France’s “Guigemar” who offers advice to Guigemar about how to love his lady after he recovered from his physical impairment. In a reversal of events, Marote offers to heal the knight physically after she helps him with his psychological turmoil. In order to give him strength, Marote slowly feeds him a “chaudel” that is named “chaudel d’amande” in the anonymous prose version (2420). She also takes other steps in order to lead him to better health:

Et cuevre son chief por le vent,
Pour le froit, que mal ne li fache;

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98 “Devastated by his wounds and dispirited by the loss of his friend, Gerart takes to bed at Châlons in a state of severe emaciation and abject depression. When Marote entertains him with a chanson de toile containing a heroine called Eurïant, the very name reinforces him with strength” (Baldwin 148).
99 “When Gerart gives the hawk to Aiglente of Metz and returns to his own Eurïant, he has learned not to test love, learned to avoid entanglement in the treachery of a southern Lisiart, learned to love simply as in the French refrains” (Paden 51).
100 “If love’s highest aspiration in the romance is fin’amors, it is often accomplished by mal d’amours (lovesickness or amors heroicus, was epidemic even in classical antiquity, if one believes literary accounts and ancient medical treatises). Afflicting mainly the aristocracy, its symptoms were many and diffuse, but paleness, nausea insomnia, and mental distress were among the most common” (Baldwin 150).
101 The “chaudel” appears as “chaudel d’amande” and “chaudel de viande” in the romance manuscripts. It appears to be a type of warm soup that contains oil and possibly walnut or meat.
Se li leve souvent la fache
Et les temples de l’aigle rose.
La puciele ne tart ne temper,
Ains baigne tant et atempre,
Et le semont tant et esforcerche,
K’il est revenues en sa forche.
(2427-2435)

Rather than healing Gerart’s battle or hunting wounds, Marote reinstates his initial physical strength so that he can continue on his path to find Eurïant. Just as Gondrée was the first to set the story and Gerart’s adventures in motion, Marote introduces a turning point in the narrative when she lets Gerart know that it is never too late to reach his Lady.

The fact that Marote’s song is a “chanchon de toile” links the narrative to the tale of Philomena in that one female character weaves together Gerart’s and Eurïant’s misfortunes and thus writes a tale of women coming to each other’s rescue. In this instance, however, Marote’s song helps to reunite the couple. By reversing the ill effects of the Lisiart-Eurïant-Gerart triangle and so undoing it for good, Marote’s song establishes a triangulated rapport that links her as mediator to the hero and heroine.

Marote does more than heal Gerart, she also furnishes the tool by which to find and remember Eurïant. She offers Gerart a hawk as a gift for his journey. Thanks to this same hawk Gerart wakes from the effect of Aiglente’s nurse's potion. In Metz, Eurïant feeds a lark and her ring accidentally slips off her finger and over the lark’s head, and rests on its neck. Gerart’s hawk later catches the same lark and the knight sees the ring that he had given Eurïant. Thanks to the hawk, Gerart then follows the correct path
toward Eurïant. Marote’s song, the hawk’s capture, and the ring undo the mistress’ spell.102

Marote acts as a healer in the more traditional way we have encountered in other narratives. She differs from Gondrée because her actions fit her within a different social class. Unlike Gondrée, whose witch-like attributes help infect healers’ reputation, Marote’s action appears to fit within acceptable standards for healing women. John W. Baldwin states that at the time Gerbert’s romance was being written, it was an accepted notion that “Bourgeois hospitality is distinguished from the courtly variety by the fact that the guest normally pays for the services he receives” (116). Marote does not expect Gerart to pay for her services, and by adding the hawk to her list of symbolic and material gifts, she comes to represent the type of healer that does not transgress the rules of courtly society.103 By voluntarily offering her services to Gerart, Marote builds an even stronger bond with Eurïant, since it is only through her song that Eurïant’s state of mind is implicitly revealed to him and to the audience. She ultimately draws Gerart back to Eurïant, and also plays a more influential role in the heroine’s life than in Gerart’s life. Through her intervention, Marote undoes the initial triangle between Lisiart, Gerart, and Eurïant and comes to play the role of mediator rather than rival. Her song subtly interweaves Eurïant’s voice with her own so as to reveal the heroine’s state of mind through the metareference to the lovers in the song, Eurïaus and Renaut.

Gerbert de Montreuil, and Jean Renart, brought about a new type of romance that pertained more to the reality of its time and that dealt with other themes than those related

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102 Aiglente’s governess had given Gerart a love-potion, but Gerart wakes from his state of love illusion once he sees Eurïant’s ring.

103 “In the Violette, Gerart finds similar lodgings at Châlons-sur-Marne with Marote, the daughter of a bourgeois, Guyon le Gris, but her behavior and skills are equally appropriate to the noble culture” (Baldwin 126).
to King Arthur and his court. *Le Roman de la Violette* was written half a century after Chrétien de Troyes’ works and, besides containing songs within it, it differs from the romances preceding it in that it incorporates more contemporary details. The romance features a variety of female healers as well as a few male doctors. The male medical practitioners are referred to as “mire,” while the female healers are devoid of any sort of professional affiliation. The healers Aglente and Aigline resemble other more common types of female healing practitioners found, for example, in Chrétien de Troyes’ romances and in the legend of Tristan. Yet, Gondrée and Marote are new and original types of healers who also play a more pivotal part in the economy of the narrative.

Gondrée the witch sets the narrative in motion and intervenes to help break the relationship between the main protagonists while Marote provides the knight with useful advice so as to lead him back to his beloved. Gondrée is condemned by the poet for betraying her lady and for wanting to get a share of Gerart’s territory. Her ill actions are, indeed, justified by her ill roots. Being a “sorchière” by nature, she is bound to stir up trouble. Marote, on the other hand, proves to be surprisingly generous toward her father’s guest. She restores his physical health, furnishes him psychological support and even offers him her hawk. While Gondrée’s healing skills are devalued by her malevolent actions, Marote’s abilities as a healer are limited to providing nursing care and psychological assistance. Both women’s intervention does, however, disturb the initial structure of relationship that linked Gerart to Lisiart through Eurïant. Since Gondrée mediates Lisiart’s act of spying on Eurïant’s body, she too betrays Gerart indirectly. Marote’s song and her mention of Eurïant’s name also link her to the heroine. The two
women temporarily shift focus from the male knights to the relationships between the heroine, Gondrée, and Marote.

Healers intervene in the narrative so as to complicate the initial love triangle found in tales that Gaston Paris coins “cycle de la gageure.” Gondrée mediates Lisiart’s gaze on the lady’s body while Marote’s song diverts focus from Gerart and his agony to the Euriant who is mourning of her love lost. Women healers thus come to play an active role in separating the couple and bringing them together so as to disturb traditional structures in which women play an object engendering relationships between men.
CONCLUSION

“Comment un médecin et patient – malade— se rencontrent? A la consultation, qu’elle ait lieu dans la maison du malade ou à l’hôpital. Une intervention chirurgicale est aussi un mode de relation.”—Gérard Danou

The preceding pages have examined the representation of women as healers in Old French narratives and shown that these characters use varied healing methods: magic, herbs, plasters, words. Each chapter focuses on one author or up to two works because the woman healer’s role within these narratives is complex. In order to represent the healer, the authors borrow from mythology, from common medical knowledge, and even from medical books written from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. Women and magic went hand in hand according to early medieval mythology. Morgan, the Lady of the Lake, and Iseut, and most female fairies and mythological figures possessed knowledge of magic and medicine. In the same light, the authors represent the female healing practitioner by referring to early medieval and classical oral tales and by borrowing discourses by their contemporaries on women and on female healing practitioners.

105 Other Old French narratives contain women healers whose roles deserve further study: for instance, the Roman de Silence by Heldris de Cornouailles, the late medieval Evangile des Quenouilles, the thirteenth-century anonymous poem known as L’Atre Perilleux, Christine de Pizan’s writings, as well as prose versions of the tales of Tristan and of Chrétien de Troyes’ romances. Such texts present references to healing by women that should be examined in the same light as the works considered in this dissertation.
Women healers’ role in literature resembles the author’s role because these characters manipulate the narrative by keeping the hero alive or letting him die. In the final chapter, Marote and Gondrée render the healer’s role more explicit since they are placed at strategic points within the economy of the narrative. Healers pull the strings so as to generate suspense and climax in the narrative. In Chrétien de Troyes’ romances, healers play a variety of different roles in order to keep both the knight and the narrative alive. Guivret’s sisters in Erec and Enide appear when the hero can no longer stay alive and needs to be seen by healers. Once the lovers’ quest for identity reaches a climax, the healers intervene and allow the story to take a new turn. In Cligès, Thessala plays the plotter and plans the adulterous couple’s escape. Thessala, by plotting the couple’s escape, helps the heroine take control of her destiny. In Yvain, the Lady and her chambermaids allow the narrative to push on by reviving the unconscious hero in the forest. In her Lais, Marie de France uses the healing scenes to insert her interpretation of love and her role as author. The healing scenes in the first, sixth, and twelfth lais have a pivotal function in the economy of the narrative, allowing the tales to gain originality. The anonymous author of Aucassin et Nicolette also places the healing scene at a crucial point of his narrative. Nicolette heals Aucassin in the forest, in a space that symbolically divides the beginning of the tale from the narrative’s ending. Nicolette puts back Aucassin’s dislocated shoulder and this act comes to symbolize the couple’s final return to a changed Beaucaire at the end of the narrative. Healing, then, is placed at a strategic point within the economy of the romance and it helps emphasize that the two lovers need to view their relationship in new terms. Finally, in the fourth chapter, Rutebeuf and the anonymous author of La Seineresse use healing to foreground the malleability of
language, the power of rhetoric, and language’s capacity to mask and unmask itself and different notions of masculinity and femininity.

These works have been examined because in them the healer embodies a paradoxical role, being astride traditional and original conceptualizations of women’s roles. The healer is simultaneously the traditional fairy-like figure of mythology, the domestic woman who has inherited from other female figures a precise knowledge of the property of herbs, and the professional practitioner of medicine. History tells us that as the practice of healing, magic, and medicine slowly becomes fields controlled by medical institutions, women’s practice suffers criticism and their image slowly changes (Dessaint 38). Literature also reveals a gradual change in the representation of female practitioners of medicine or magic. The five chapters present, indeed, a progression from twelfth to thirteenth century in the way healers are portrayed. Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France depict a naïve sort of healer whose sole purpose is to help the Lady voice her desire and consent for a chosen lover, but these same authors sometimes give their healers a more active role. Morgan passes by as a mere reference yet these early works feature other women healers whose practice is shown in greater detail. Thirteenth-century authors are more inclined to undermine or mock women healers and to characterize them as threatening or feigning to be knowledgeable or experienced healers. Nicolette can be considered an exceptional figure because she connects Saracen and southern French cultures. Rutebeuf refers to the famous physician and gynecologist Trotula, the anonymous author of the fabliau states that the healer is a bloodletter, and Gerbert de Montreuil specifies that Gondrée is a witch.
The authors of these Old French narratives struggle with their portrayal of the healer because she stands in opposition to the lady; she takes on an active role and demonstrates a certain degree of independence and authority while she also bridges the gap between the working world and the domestic realm.

In an age when women were generally conceived as inferior to men, as “irrational, pleasure-seeking, oversexed, and wholly corporeal” beings, the woman healer of Old French narratives stands as a distinctive counter-example. She contradicts the normative representation of women as “headless bodies.” She possesses knowledge and displays rationality. Her role as a sexual being is minimized in that most authors foreground her skill and practice. While in the shadow of the heroine who personifies the definition of woman par excellence, the female healing practitioner challenges the very gender roles that differentiate her from the Lady. While putting into question the Lady’s gender identity, the healer also generates a questioning of structures that maintain bonds between men through women’s exchange. As Gérard Danou has stated, medical or surgical practice, generates a form of interaction between doctor and patient, and, in the same light, healing can help women interact, collaborate, in order to voice their role in their own destiny. The healer’s relationship with the heroine temporarily weakens ties between men and helps women gain agency.

As a final note, in the previous chapters, I have tried to demonstrate that studying the representation of female practitioners of healing in literature helps generate a correlation between the study of medieval literature and medicine, and contemporary gender and feminist studies. The healer straddles between the world of mythology and the

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medieval world. Authors often give an informed description of contemporary medical
practice when depicting how their healers treat the ill character of the narrative, yet they
rarely emphasize their female practitioners’ professional affiliation. Healers bridge
mythology and history while also blurring the differences between male and female
gender categories. Ultimately, the figure of the healer resists medieval commonplaces
about women and calls for fresh reading of plots.


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