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Chretien De Troyers and Marie De France: Their Works of Support

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Poster Presentation 4

CHRETIEN DE TROYES AND MARIE DE FRANCE:
THEIR WORKS OF SUPPORT

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Twelfth-century England and France witnessed the beginnings of early political and geographical centralization. At this time, independent nobles began to unify their forces, granting one another political loyalty in exchange for physical protection and an increase in resource availability. Centralization having not yet reached the royal level, early twelfth century social structure was a precarious one, at best, balancing the tensions between the royalty, the upper nobility, and the lower nobility. The medieval royal and baronial courts, then, were placed in a competition to win the alliances of the knights and merchants. Doing so required that the court be renowned for its generosity and its high ideals. Thus, the twelfth-century lord or lady required a vehicle for self-promotion. Such a vehicle was found in men and (less commonly) women of letters, individuals who wrote either at or for a court.

As in previous centuries, this imperial patronage produced literature quite flattering to the ruler who had commissioned or inspired it. The works of two influential twelfth-century authors, Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France, are no exception. Writing during a period characterized both by legal reform and by tensions between members of the upper and lower nobility, Chrétien and Marie concerned themselves with their patrons' political agendas.

In this study I argue that for Chrétien, who produced much of his work in France under the patronage of Countess Marie de Champagne, this concern involved supporting the baronial viewpoint. Thus, as in such works as Yvain, we find an ineffectual if good-hearted king Arthur, one whose continuing failures to rule properly leave his barons and his knightly servants with true privilege and power. Similarly, I also argue that Marie de France, who likely wrote at the court of King Henry II of England, fills her works with the legal issues so important to her royal patron. Her lais Bisclavret and Lanval both reflect an emphasis on justice and a need for judicial reform.