

## **Making Your Memory Mine: Marie de France and the Adventures of the Bretons**

ABSTRACT: The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France undertook to preserve for posterity the adventures and romances embodied in a vanishing genre, the old Breton *lais* as she had heard them recounted by minstrels (*Prologue* 40). That she succeeded is evidenced by the popularity of her *Lais* for more than eight hundred years; that she perhaps succeeded too well is suggested by the fact that, within a century of her lifetime, the Breton *lais* had become exclusively a French form of literature (Busby, in Pickens 343), and whatever might have been the original form, linguistic structure and cultural content in Breton has been irrevocably relegated to the realm of conjecture.

This raises questions about the relationship between translation and cultural autonomy. Marie's purported memorial to the Bretons became instead an institution of French language and culture. Had the Breton features been totally effaced, this could be called assimilation; had they been preserved intact, it would have been literal translation. In fact, Marie's work can be reduced to no such simple binary. Rather, I argue that her unsettling and robust positioning of contradictory elements—sorcery, sensuality, feudality, religion—results from her strategy of *adopting* the memory of the Bretons: neither glossing over its strangeness nor highlighting it as foreign, but making its distant and exotic characteristics part of her own invented heritage. I maintain that her translation project is more effectively analyzed as an ethical process of incorporation and restitution (Steiner) than as a placement along the spectrum of foreignization versus domestication (Venuti).