

Gendered Emotives in Medieval Literature: Marie de France's Grasp of the Tristan Corpus

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Abstract:

Writing one's name on a hazel branch in a manner that would be readable to the happy few – namely the beloved and her accomplices – while remaining invisible to all of the entourage of a medieval king – is a complex gesture, implying the alphabet of signs and the language of emotions.

Tristan l'Amerus (Tristan the lover), the hero of Marie de France's *Lai du Chèvrefeuille*, seems to master both arts. The "poetics of memory" (Whalen 2008) and the "voice of pleasure" (Callahan 2001) point to what William M. Reddy would call an "emotive" (2001: 105-7): in declining his identity, the knight seeks to move the queen deeply enough to make her invest the inscribed object with an interpersonal, unique significance leading to a passionate tryst in the woods, meant to write a page of unparalleled romantic history.

It is the masculine inscription of "Tristesse" (sadness) through wood carving with a dagger, but also the suggestion of a symbiosis with the feminine, as embodied by the honeysuckle vine, that create two kinds of sap (the signifier & the signified) running through the vegetal bodies drawn away from the biosphere of love, only to materialize and transcend the imminence of an intimately desirable death.

Tristan's identity is hence "rooted" in his first name, but also in its violent, unnatural encoding in the syntax of wood fibers. The emotive agency of the lover's calligraphy invites Marie's readers to a medieval "navigation of feeling", sensitive to the conjugated pragmatics of passing and immortalization: a personalized version of the ancient "carpe diem" and "memento mori" is thus simultaneously provided.

Keywords: Tristan, gendered identity, medieval narrative, emotive semiology.