

Summer Reading Essay
DUE: Beginning of class on August 13, 2026

Welcome to Humane Letters II!

How are men to live in relation to one another? From the Late Antique Classical culture through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the Enlightenment and Modernity, the second year of Aristoi's Humane Letters program is an exploration of the history and literature of the Medieval and Early Modern periods in quest of answers to this question.

To whet our appetite in this segment of our search, we will first become acquainted with the stories of Marie de France, who lived in the late Twelfth Century, and is the earliest known French woman poet. Marie wrote *lais* (a short poetic form) based on Breton tales of chivalry and romance, in which noble men and women live and act in a world of magical beings, potions, and even a werewolf.

This small volume of short tales of the interface between the natural and the supernatural set in the world of Medieval Twelfth-Century courtly society offers some answers to what it means to be human, answers that are evident in the strangeness of these stories. Read. Think. Then do what follows below.

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Purchase or check out the Penguin Classics edition of *The Lais of Marie de France* (1986, 1999).

- I. Read the entire book through first for enjoyment.
- II. Re-read the book, with an eye to answering the following question:
 - i. What are the chief characteristics of courtly love as illustrated in the stories, and what is the relationship in the stories between this kind of love and Christian virtue?
- III. Compose a two-to-three page essay (Times New Roman, 12 point font, 1 inch margins) laying out your answer to the question utilizing quotations from the book. Use parenthetical citations. For example:

"Many of the women in the family, I tell you truly, were born without noses and lived noseless" (Bisclavret 72).

Essays are to be typed, and utilize double-spacing, one-inch margins, and a 12-point font. Your essay will be recorded as your first course test grade.