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# Social Justice as Found in 'Equitan'

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Marie de France's Lai "Équitan" is a tragic love story which explores the Medieval social code of conduct for love. In this Lai, not only do we find some basic rules about how it was necessary to behave when in love, but we are also shown the ramifications for not following these rules. The text contains two themes--faithfulness and self-control--which underline the central premise that those who go beyond what is acceptable according to social law will be punished. First, I would like to show the centrality of faithfulness and self-control in "Équitan." Then, I will show how the two lovers' fortunes are reversed as a result of their lack of fidelity and control, leading us to the final central theme of justice in which the lovers are punished for their impropriety.

At first sight, "Équitan" seems very simply to be a story about faithfulness. It describes a king, Équitan, who deceives his vassal, and a wife who is unfaithful to her husband. But in actuality, this is a story of how not to behave that uses the unfaithfulness of its protagonists to serve a higher purpose. I do not arbitrarily choose this theme. There are twenty-six references to faithfulness throughout the text. The first contextualized evidence of the importance of fidelity is when the king debates whether he should pursue his vassal's wife as his lover. Here, he speaks for 24 lines (65-88) about how a relationship of this sort would deceive the vassal. This monologue follows the introduction of the seneschal as a loyal knight:

> Equitan ot un seneschal,
> Bon chevalier, pruz e leal (21-22)
>
> Equitan had a seneschal,
> a good knight, brave and loyal.

In the very beginning, then, we see that the seneschal is loyal. His loyalty is directly juxtaposed to Équitan's infidelity.

In his book, Feudal Society, Marc Bloch underlines the importance of loyalty between vassal and lord. He states that among the main characteristics of feudalism are "ties of obedience and protection which bind

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man to man and, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage" (Bloch 446). In other words, when Équitan and the seneschal entered into their feudal relationship, they promised each other faithfulness and protection. Équitan hesitates to breach this contract:

> E si jo l'aim, jeo ferai mal:
> Ceo est la femme al seneschal;
> Garder li dei amur e fei
> Si cum jeo voil k'il face a mei (71-74)
>
> yet if I love her, I'm doing wrong;
> she's the wife of my seneschal.
> I owe him the same faith and love
> that I want him to give me.

In this citation, the reader is alerted to the fact that engaging in such an extra-marital relationship would be "wrong". The word "mal" of line 71, however, takes us a step further because it tells us that this relationship would not only be bad, but evil according to the laws of Chivalry. In these lines, we see that the king knows he should honor the reciprocal faith of their feudal agreement. Nonetheless, the king ignores his scruples and asks the woman to be his lover.

The woman accepts Équitan as her lover only after a great deal of thought, and in her monologue we again see that faithfulness is paramount:

> Mieuz vaut uns povres hum leals,
> Si en sei ad sen e valur,
> E greinur joie est de s'amur
> Qu'il n'est princë u de rei,
> Quant il n'ad lëauté en sei (138-142)
>
> A poor but loyal man is worth more--
> if he also possesses good sense and virtue--
> and his love brings greater joy
> than the love of a prince or a king
> who has no loyalty in him.

The overall message of this passage is obviously faithfulness, which manifests itself in the words "leals", "lëauté", "sen" et "valur" In these lines, we see that the woman moralizes about being faithful, and it would seem that she is trying to refuse the king's advances. But we must be careful not to read too much into the woman's words. Yes, she and the king both question the morality of deceiving the seneschal, but they both know that extra-marital affairs were the very essence of "courlty love":

> Not only does this extra-marital love agree with the particular morals of the troubadors, but it is also the only love worthy of a courtly woman. A true lady owes it to herself to have a lover, but only one.
>
> (Lazar 137)

Through this quotation we see that a courtly woman was expected to have a lover. In the text, there is a direct reference to this assumption, which illustrates that the king and the woman understood that affairs were prevalent. As the king says:

> Si bele dame tant mar fust,
> S'ele n'amast e dru n'eüst!
> Que devendreit sa curteisie,
> S'ele n'amast de druërie? (79-82)
>
> It would be a shame for such a beautiful woman
> not to have a lover!
> What would become of her finer qualities
> if she didn't nourish them by a secret love?

The king states that a courtly woman should have a lover, otherwise she would no longer be following the rules of courtly love. The social environment of the time, then, clearly tells us that when the woman says that a faithful, poor man is worth more than an unfaithful king, she is not opposed to an affair. She is concerned, however, about whether the king will be loyal once the relationship has begun. She expects her lover to be faithful and is concerned that Équitan "has no loyalty in him" (142). For the woman, faithfulness in love is key.

To summarize, in "Équitan" we find two monologues which debate fidelity from two different angles. First, the king wrestles with his urge to betray a feudal allegiance, and second, the woman argues for devotion in love.

As we look closer at the text, we see that the theme of self-control joins that of faithfulness. Again, I do not choose this theme arbitrarily. In the text we frequently find the words "mesure", "sens", "sage" and "raison"; the words "courtoisie", "noblesse", "seignurie" and "prousesse"; and the words "folie", "mal" and "vilinie" What do these words mean? What do they suggest? Let us turn to Moshé Lazar, a scholar of courtly love, to provide us with the answer:

> Measure being the foundation of cortezia, it has to mean: a disciplined social life, the voluntary submission of the man to the demands of his environment, the manner in which to behave towards his peers, the program of his obligations. It is also self-control, the domination of instincts and refinement of personality...To act against the moral and social code of the troubadors is to transgress the norms of good conduct and good sense, it is a demezura. (29, 30)

To have "mesure" means to be disciplined and refined--these values are the foundation of courtly love. Further, not to follow this code of conduct is to violate the moral and social norms. In courtly love it was of utmost importance to act with self-control.

In "Équitan" we see that self-control is indeed very important, but we are also told that if someone is truly in love, it is impossible to maintain this control:

Cil metent lur vie en nuncure
Ki d'amur n'unt sens ne mesure;
Tels est la mesure d'amer
Que nuls n'i deit reisun garder (17-20)

Whoever indulges in love without sense or moderation
recklessly endangers his life;
such is the nature of love
that no one involved with it can keep his head.

This is the central, paradoxical thesis of "Équitan": If you love, you must maintain a sense of decorum, yet nature is such that people in love are not able to control themselves. This passage clearly illustrates the aspect of chivalry that "Équitan" explores. We will find a situation in which two lovers are unable to maintain control, therefore breaking societal code, and then we will see the results of their "démesure"

Three reversals of fortune in the text illustrate the results of losing one's "mesure" In the beginning of "Équitan", the king, the lady and the seneschal are all described as noble. We are introduced to the king with the following description:

D'Equitan, ki mut fu curteis,
Sire des Nauns, jostise e reis (11-12)

About Equitan, a most courtly man,
the lord of Nauns, a magistrate and king.

The same sorts of words are used to describe the seneschal ("Bon chevalier, pruz e leal [22]) and the woman ("Mut la trova curteise e sage" [51]). So, in the beginning, all three characters seem courtly and upright.

It does not take long, however, for the king to start losing esteem, as he asks the wife of his vassal to become his lover. According to Andreas Capellanus' The Art of Courtly Love, the woman should be of a higher social status than the suitor, which gives her the right to refuse the relationship:

> Besides, it is not usual for a man of higher rank to love faithfully a woman of a lower one, and if he does he soon comes to loathe her love, and he despises her on slight provocation. It is easy to see that this is contrary to the mandates of Love, in whose court there is no place for distinctions of rank; lovers of whatever rank serve on equal terms in his palace, and no one enjoys any privileges because of his higher station.
>
> (Capellanus 86)

This is not so in "Équitan" Because the king is her lord, the woman really has no right to turn him down without jeopardizing her position and that of her husband:

> Moreover, in Equitan the birth and growth of love are enriched by particular nuances which result from the royal condition of the lover.

> To the moral worries are added social worries. He does not have the right to love the wife of his seneschal.
>
> (Jonin 30)

The king knows that by asking the woman to be his lover he is putting undue pressure on her, yet decides to exercise his rank by making his request anyway. As the woman says,

> Li riches hum requide bien
> Que nuls ne li toille s'amie
> Qu'il voelt amer par seignurie! (146-148)
>
> The rich man, however, is confident
> that no one will steal a mistress away
> whose favor he obtains by his authority over her.

In an attempt to make this situation appear more like a regular courtly proposition, the king decides to play at being the woman's vassal:

> Ma chiere dame, a vus m'ustrei:
> Ne me tenez mie pur rei,
> Mes pur vostre humme e vostre ami (169-171)
>
> My dear lady, I'm offering myself to you!
> Don't think of me as your king,
> but as your vassal and your lover.

These words clearly contrast with those of the woman a few lines earlier where she explains that she is not of his status:

> Vus estes reis de grant noblesce;
> Ne sui mie de teu richesce (133-134)
>
> Because you're a powerful king
> and my husband is your vassal.

And so we see that the king has brought the first reversal to fruition when he says that she should be the proud one and he the beggar (175-176). The woman is now the lady of the court whom the vassal beseeches. Meanwhile, the seneschal is busy taking care of the kingdom's affairs and thus he seems to assume the king's role:

> Tute sa tere li gardout
> E meinteneit e justisout (23-24)
>
> who took care of his land for him,
> governed it and administered it.

At the end of the first reversal, the vassal has become the king, the vassal's wife has become a noble lady, and the king has become the vassal.

The second reversal begins when the woman becomes worried that the king is going to leave her. At this point in the story, the citizens of Équitan's kingdom are concerned that he has not married and consequently has no heir to his throne. When the woman hears of this, she fears that he will want to end the relationship. This is the beginning of the end for her, because as she begs the king not to leave her, she loses her self-control. She is no longer acting refined and courtly, but rather is a jealous, desperate woman:

> Femme prendrez, fille a un rei,
> E si vus partirez de mei;
> Sovent l'oi dire e bien le sai.
> E jeo, lasse que devendrai?
> Pur vus m'estuet aveir la mort,
> car jeo ne sai autre cunfort (215-220)
>
> you're going to take a wife, some king's daughter,
> and you will get rid of me;
> I've heard all about it, I know it's true.
> And--alas!--what will become of me?
> On your account I must now face death,
> for I have no other comfort than you.

This is not the courtly "lady" on a pedestal whom the vassal beseeches. She is clearly in a different position than in the beginning when it was the king who played the vassal and begged her to become his lover. At that time, he said he was dying of his love for her:

> Sun curage li descovri;
> Saveir li fet qu'il meort pur li.
> Del tut li peot faire confort
> E bien li peot doner la mort (113-116)
>
> He revealed his desire to her,
> letting her know that he was dying because of her;
> that it lay in her power to comfort him
> or to let him die.

Now, she is the one talking of how she will die if the relationship ends. She has lost her dignity, her "mesure" and consequently her nobility.

At this point, the king tries to comfort her by saying that if her husband were dead, he would marry her:

> Si vostre sire fust finez,
> Reïne e dame vus fereie (226-227)
>
> If your husband were dead,
> I'd make you my lady and queen.

The woman seizes this idea and immediately comes up with a plan for her husband's murder:

> E si de ceo l'aseürast
> Que pur autre ne la lessast,
> Hastivement purchacereit
> A sun seignur que morz sereit (231-234)
>
> if he would assure her
> that he wouldn't leave her for someone else,
> she would quickly undertake
> to do away with her lord.

This complete change of heart is surprising when one remembers how she praised her loyal husband in the beginning. Then, she clearly told the king that a faithful, poor man was worth more than an unfaithful king (138-142). But now, it is obvious that she has breached the social law of "mesure." She is no longer concerned about being faithful to her husband and she has also lost her self-control, going so far as to plan her husband's murder.

The result of this breach of social code is the second reversal of fortune. The lady has now lost her position as a noble lady and instead has to beg and plot to keep her relationship with the king. The king, however, seems at this point to have recaptured his position as king, since the focus of this section is on his kingly duty to produce an heir. The words of the text also "re-crown" him king, as we see in this passage:

> Ne troveissez humme si os,
> Si le reis pur lui n'enveiast,
> Ja une feiz dedenz entrast (192-194)
>
> and no one was so daring,
> if the king didn't summon him,
> that he would ever enter there.

The words here invoque a sense of respect and fear--appropriate emotions before royalty. We see that no one dares disturb him and that the king's orders are obeyed. Hence, he no longer is portrayed as the beseeching vassal. In the meantime, the seneschal continues to fulfill his responsibilities, and in this section we see his duties further defined:

> Li seneschals la curt teneit,
> Les plaiz e les clamurs oieit (195-196)
>
> Meanwhile, the seneschal held court
> and heard pleas and complaints.

We see now that the seneschal is a judge. At the end of the second section, the king has recaputred his role as king, the woman has become a

beggar, and the seneschal, while no longer king, is in a position of weighty importance--that of judge.

This brings us to the third and final reversal in which the king joins his lover in "démesure." In this section, they are both vilified as they prepare the seneschal's murder, no longer displaying any kind of restraint. The beginning of this section is marked by the king's agreement to help the woman with her murder plot:

> Il li respunt que si ferat;
> Ja cele rien ne li dirrat
> Que il ne face a sun poeir,
> Turt a folie u a saveir (237-240)
>
> He agreed to do so;
> there was nothing she could demand of him
> that he wouldn't do, if he possibly could,
> whether it turned out well or badly.

The words "folie" and "saveir" in these lines (literally translated as "madness" and "wiseness") remind us of the central paradox in this lai--if you love, you must maintain your dignity, but that those who are truly in love are unable to keep their emotions under control. At this point in the story, we see that indeed our lovers are not able to control themselves, but are ready to do anything in order to satisfy their own immediate desires. They plan the murder, and even go so far as to make love in the seneschal's bed in front of the boiling water they intend to use as the murder weapon (279-284). Since they can enjoy sexual pleasures in the presence of such a morbid reminder of their intentions, we see that they no longer feel any sense of obligation toward the seneschal and that they have no guilt, no self-control.

Further reinforcing the king's fall from grace are the words used to describe him. In the beginning, the king is described as:

> ...Mut fu curteis,
> Sire des Nauns, jostise e reis.
> Equitan fu mut de grant pris
> E mut amez en sun païs (11-14)
>
> ...a courtly man,
> the lord of Nauns, a magistrate and king.
> Equitan was a man of great worth,
> dearly loved in his own land.

We see that he is much loved and very courtly. All these words are positive and evoque images of courtly behaviour. At the end, however, we see that the words used to describe the king are no longer positive. The story says that "Seiner se fet cuntre sun mal" (265) 'He had himself bled to ward off illness'. Another translation of this line is 'He had himself bled to ward off his evil', since "sun mal" can mean "his evil" The king conducted this blood-letting the day of the attempted murder, and it seems as though

it is an attempt to purge himself of the evil he was about to commit. Furthermore, when the seneschal discovers the two lovers together in his bed, the king jumps into the boiling water "Pur sa vileinie covrir" (294) "To hide his villainy." With these words, we see that in addition to being evil, the king is described as villanous. In contrast to these portrayals, the seneschal is now called a "prodhum" (meaning "good man", or "wiseman") despite the fact that he seizes his unfaithful wife and throws her into the boiling water, killing her (277). The seneschal (who is never fully developed as a character) does not exist as a person, but is rather the epitome of a faithful, courtly knight. He is the antipode of the two lovers, as Jeanne Wathelet-Willem describes in her article entitled, "Equitan dans l'oeuvre de Marie de France":

> The seneschal is a good knight, gallant and loyal, who carries out with devotion his duties for his sovereign. Nevertheless, the lovers have no pity for him. Not content to betray him, they draw up an infernal plot which, in their minds, must bring about his death. (326)

The lovers are held up as blameworthy and hateful, whereas the seneschal is honored and respected. At the end of the third reversal of fortune, the king and the woman are evil and villanous, having lost all sense of "mesure" while the seneschal is seen as an honest and upright man.

From these characters, the reader understands that lovers who lose their sense of faithfulness and self-control are reprehensible. But the moral of this story does not stop here. Underlying the two themes of faithfulness and self-control is a central message of justice. Not only are the lovers treated as villains in this Lai, they are also given their just desserts: in the end they both die. Interestingly, there is no sense of regret when they die. On the contrary, their deaths are quickly followed by a lesson to be learned:

> Ki bien vodreit reisun entendre
> Ici purreit ensample prendre:
> Tels purcace la mal d'autrui
> Dunt tuz li mals revert sur lui (307-310)
>
> Whoever wants to hear some sound advice
> can profit from this example:
> he who plans evil for another
> may have that evil rebound back on him.

So the lovers deserved to die because they did not follow the social law of "mesure." Rather, they lost all self-control and consequently merited death.

The fact that the seneschal is a judge also supports the theme of justice. Although there are many roles this character could have played and still have been the king's vassal, he is very specifically put in a position of justice. Thus, while the lovers fool around, the seneschal looks after matters of law. From the very beginning of this Lai, there are many examples of how the seneschal is an honest man. First we see in line 24

that he "justisout", in court, revealing his identity as judge. Futhermore, in the original text, lines 185-196 are set apart as one stanza. This stanza deals exclusively with the details of the liaison, describing how the lovers find time together and how they ensure their privacy. The last two lines of this stanza, however, tell us what the seneschal has been doing in the meantime:

> Li seneschals la curt teneit,
> Les plaiz e les clamurs oieit (195-196)
>
> Meanwhile, the seneschal held court
> and heard pleas and complaints.

These two lines do not flow smoothly from the description of the lovers' liaisons that immediately preceed. We must conclude, then, that this description of the seneschal's judicial duties is intended to make a stark contrast with the lovers' act of infidelity. It is clear that the author wants to make a juxtaposition between the acts of deception on the part of the lovers and the acts of justice on the part of the seneschal.

The final, and most convincing evidence that justice is the central theme of this Lai is the title, "Équitan", meaning equality. Although the king is of a higher social status, and therefore would have been considered superior to the vassal in the Middle Ages, we see that in the end it is he who dies--his title does not protect him from justice. After all the dishonesty on the king's part, the seneschal has his revenge. Ironically, the king's name is "Équitan" and since he is the only character in the story with a name, it is highlighted. From it, we see that the king supposedly embodies equality yet becomes the example of justice: whereas the king was supposed to be the one ruling justly over his kingdom, he delegates his duties to the seneschal whose wife he seduces and whom he subsequently tries to kill. When Équitan dies in the end, we see that even kings are punished for transgressing the social code.

In Marie de France's Lai Équitan, it is clear that fidelity and self-control are key elements. These themes saturate the text, from the vocabulary, to whole sections of dialogue dealing almost exclusively with these issues. It is impossible not to acknowledge their prevalence. But these themes are not present in the text haphazardly--they are there to serve a point. Fidelity and self-control are elements which the text manipulates to illustrate that justice transcends social status and will prevail over all who choose to ignore societal codes for behavior. By the end of this story, we see that truly:

> Cil metent lur vie en nuncure
> Ki d'amur n'unt sen ne mesure (18-19)
>
> Whoever indulges in love without sense or moderation
> recklessly endangers his life.

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